MILA OLSEN
UNDER NORTHERN SKIES 1&2
TRAPPED
COLLECTION
UNTIL YOU LOVE ME
&
UNTIL THE DARKEST
OF NIGHT

Mila Olsen

Trapped Collection

UNDER NORTHERN SKIES 1 & 2

UNTIL YOU LOVE ME
UNTIL THE DARKEST OF NIGHT

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TRAPPED: UNTIL YOU LOVE ME

UNDER NORTHERN SKIES 1

PROLOGUE

I can still picture him perfectly, the way he looked on the day he kidnapped me. The memory is like a delicate, winged creature, trapped for eternity in a mantle of amber.

He was standing in the parking lot of the visitors' center, with a dark band of towering sequoias at his back. It was already early evening, and his dark eyes shimmered in the light of the setting sun. Sparks danced within them like tiny will-o'-the-wisps from an enchanted world, seeming to promise secrets, maybe even adventures. Back then, I wanted both.

How else could I have been so deaf and blind to all the warning signals? The glances over his shoulder to check whether the backpackers had gone inside yet. The way the keys jangled anxiously in his fingers, the laughter that echoed through the silence a shade too loudly. I didn't notice, or didn't want to. All I heard were the silent questions behind that shimmer in his eyes.

Do you want this?

It could have meant anything.

Do you want to come with me?

Do you want to sleep with me?

Do you want me to kidnap you?

CHAPTER 1

I balance on the edge of the curb, humming, arms outstretched as though I'm flying.

Today, I finally managed to dye the school mashed potatoes bright blue without Mr. Smith, the cafeteria server, noticing. I grin to myself. Not because I'm picturing the look on Madison's face, or anyone else's, but because I've officially passed the admissions test for the most important club in the whole high school. Which makes me the first person in our grade to make it in, and only the third person in our town.

Although "town" is an exaggeration when it comes to this tiny village in the Nevada desert. Not even a hermit would want to live in Ash Springs. It sits forgotten in the middle of nowhere, lifeless like a shed snakeskin. I should probably be grateful that this wasteland even has a school bus stop. A veil of sullen thoughts descends over my mind, but I push it aside immediately. Nothing can ruin my good mood today—not the extinct-looking streets, not the heat that seems to burn the life out of everything around me. Today, I'm only focusing on the positives.

The sun prickles my skin; my hair tickles my shoulder blades through my backless top, and my colorful bracelets jingle softly.

How will joining the Hades in Love club change my life? Will I automatically become one of the popular kids? I mean, the members are considered the high school creme-de-la-creme—it's an honor just

to be nominated for the admissions test. I bet this is finally going to turn my life around completely!

At the intersection, I turn off the main road and onto a sparsely populated side street Jayden has fittingly dubbed the Road to Nowhere. From there, I take the worn footpath to our house, dodging sagebrush every few feet as I walk. Today, even its herbal smell is like some enticing perfume.

No sooner have I reached the picket fence than I spot my third-oldest brother. Liam. He's standing under the apple tree with his eyes closed, balancing on one leg with the sole of his other foot nestled against his thigh. His palms are pressed together above his head, forming a triangle with his arms.

Ever since he came back from India, he's spent every afternoon in the prickly grass, contorting into bizarre positions he calls the Swan, the Crane, or the Crow.

"Is that the Vulture?" I ask, tapping Liam on the shoulder as I walk past, but lightly, so he won't lose his balance.

"It's the Tree, goober," he replies quietly without opening his eyes.

I pick a puny-looking apple and take an energetic bite. Chewing, I watch him for a moment. Liam's the brother I feel closest to. When I was little, he always came up with the best games for me.

"Go catch the rhinoceros!" he'd exclaim to wake me every Sunday morning, and I'd immediately jump out of bed and run into the yard to rope the beast with my invisible lasso. While Ethan and Avery set the table on the veranda, I'd polish my imaginary animal's horn until it gleamed and "feed" it raspberries before popping them into my own mouth.

"Someday Louisa's going to go crazy, and it'll be your fault," Ethan would tell Liam every time, but Liam would just laugh and bring me a bowl of water for my pink rhino. Liam claimed I was more likely to go crazy from doing too much math homework.

"Jayden home yet?" I ask Liam now, even though I know I should quit bugging him while he's trying to meditate.

"Already in there working on one of his million stories."

I have to smile. “Of course.” I picture Jayden’s slim fingers flying across the keys on his laptop. Living in Ash Springs obviously doesn’t bother him, since he can travel to any world he wants through his stories. Liam doesn’t mind anymore, either, not since he hiked across India and up into Nepal in order to find himself. When he returned from Kathmandu, he was as emaciated as an ascetic and his matted hair was crawling with lice, but his soul was filled with inner peace. Somehow I seem to be the only one on bad terms with Ash Springs. Avery and Ethan don’t want to leave, either. They both work on the same farm that Dad used to.

On a whim, I stretch up on tiptoe and blow into Liam’s face. I’d kind of like to share my joy with him, but I don’t think the name Hades in Love will make him explode in rapturous excitement. “Wind in your treetop, you knotty old oak,” I say, hefting my backpack, and head for the rickety stairs leading into the house. It’s a one-story wooden building on short stilts that’s always reminded me a little of an old longhouse. The front door is open because of the heat, as it always is when at least two of my brothers are at home.

The wooden floorboards creak beneath my feet as I walk toward the kitchen. There’s a plate of sandwiches on the counter beside the gas stove. Jayden probably took it out of the fridge and forgot to put it back. Nothing left of the ham-and-cheese rolls but crumbs. Typical. I take one with salami and flop into a chair in the breakfast nook. I could have eaten at school, of course, but after the whole mashed-potatoes thing, making myself scarce seemed like a wiser course of action. Too bad Jayden’s home already. He could have told me how everyone reacted.

As I eat, I fumble my phone out of my backpack and check Facebook. Twelve new messages jump out at me immediately.

Congrats, Madison’s written. She’s not one to waste words, especially not on gushing praise. She’s like Ethan that way. *Welcome to godhood*, Ava’s message says. My stomach starts fluttering in anticipation. Hades in Love means tons of fun, tons of parties, even weekend trips to Vegas clubs with the older boys. Provided, of course, that I manage to convince Ethan that I’m spending the night at Elizabeth’s. I scroll through the rest of the congratulatory

messages and accept my new friend requests, all of them from club members. Even one from Damon, one of the hottest guys in the senior class. I blow a few sweaty strands of hair away from my face and smile to myself as I accept the request. Every girl at school has a little bit of a crush on Damon, and I have to admit that he's the first boy I've seen that the thought of kissing him doesn't gross me out.

"Where is she?"

Ethan's voice whip-cracks through the open kitchen window, and I jump. Oh, man, he sounds pissed. I hear Liam reply with his usual serenity but don't hear what he says, because I'm busy rummaging through the apocalyptic chaos of my backpack to fish out some books and pens as fast as I can.

Ethan's footfalls thunder across the floorboards. By the time I open the book, he's already in the kitchen doorway, staring at me with narrowed eyes. He's still wearing his work clothes: the plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up, the mud-caked lace-up boots. Not a good sign. Apparently he was in such a rush to get here that he didn't change at the farm the way he normally does. Hopefully he wasn't hurrying on my account.

"What were you thinking?" he snaps.

Oh no! Suddenly it's even hotter in here. I pretend to continue doing my homework. "What was I thinking when?" I ask cautiously.

"Do you have any idea what kind of consequences this will have?"

I hate when he doesn't just come out and say what the problem is. Especially because I can think of several possible reasons he might be mad right now.

I adjust the ruffles on my pink lace top and then look back up at him. "Ethan, I need to finish this homework, and I really don't know what—"

"Homework?" His gaze shifts to my textbook, and one corner of his mouth twitches derisively. "You should probably turn the book right-side up, then."

"I was just about to get started."

"Your math teacher called me."

A sinking feeling spreads through the pit of my stomach as I flip the math book around. "Ms. Fitch?" I can only think of one reason why she would want to talk to him, but it's even worse than the blue potatoes.

"Oh, so you know her name? That's comforting." He scowls at me, folding his arms. He's only twenty-nine, and I know a lot of girls at my school think he's cute, but to me he's always seemed like he came into the world old and uptight. Even his hipster ponytail does nothing to remedy it.

"Louisa. She. Saw. You."

My heart somersaults in alarm, but then I remember: Ms. Fitch can't have seen me. Nobody but Mr. Smith was in the cafeteria, and he didn't notice me, because he was busy sorting silverware.

"Of course she saw me," I say evasively. "We had math today."

"You dyed the school cafeteria mashed potatoes blue and caused mass hysteria. Don't you dare deny it." He looks so furious that I really don't dare deny it. He's standing in the door broad-legged, almost like he's trying to block my escape.

"She *would* call a little prank 'mass hysteria,' wouldn't she..." I murmur in a lame effort to defend myself. But goddammit, why did he have to be the one to find out? Why couldn't it have been Avery? Because Ethan's the one Ms. Fitch always calls, obviously. It's like they're united in a losing battle against me. She probably has a secret crush on him. I mean, she was totally thrilled to hear that he'd managed to get custody of us—at barely eighteen years old—right after Dad died.

"So you admit it?" Ethan shakes his head in exasperation.

"I thought I'd already been tried and convicted."

He takes a deep breath. I stare at the words and numbers on the page in front of me, mentally bracing myself for the impending lecture, but he's silent. I look up. There's a lot more than just irritation in his eyes. Frustration. Worry. Grief.

"That's not all, Louisa."

True! I smooth the textbook page with my palm, just to have something to do.

"You lied to me." His tone is serious, and he sounds like he's struggling to keep it objective. "You told me you got a C+ on your math test, but you got an F."

My cheeks start burning. I'm ashamed of the grade, ashamed at my own inability to think logically. Liam says I perceive the world using feelings rather than reason, which has its advantages. Ethan, unfortunately, sees it differently.

"Nothing to say for yourself?"

The disappointment in his voice is boundless, which I assume is more due to the lie than the grade. I know it was shady of me, but then again, he's always putting me in these emotional headlocks, acting all injured, and it's completely infuriating. "I have dyscalculia, I can't help it."

"That's not what I mean."

"I didn't want to make you mad."

"So you faked my signature? Don't give me that wide-eyed look, I know you did. And anyway, having trouble with math is no excuse for getting bad grades. It means one thing: study, study, study. More than anyone else. But you never even opened the book, did you?"

"Studying doesn't help me. I don't *get* math!" I straighten the dog-eared corner at the bottom of the page. "And besides, I wanted to—"

"You wanted to go to the movies with Ava, so you decided to just bump your grade up a notch." Ethan snorts with indignation. "Louisa... I won't tolerate you lying to me!" He's still standing in the doorway. The heat is hanging in the air, sticking to my skin, and all at once I feel like a cornered animal. Ethan's not letting me off easy this time. But in a way, this situation is his fault, too.

"If you'd let me do more, I wouldn't have to lie," I blurt out angrily. "You're stricter than any dad I know. Why can't you be like Ava's dad?"

"Ava's dad works twenty-four hours a day. He has no idea what his daughter gets up to."

"At least Ava's allowed to go out with her friends if she wants!" I slam the book shut. "And I always have to ask your permission. To

do anything! Even if I just want to go over to Emma's. It's so unfair. I'm not three anymore!"

Ethan regards me for a while, his gaze softening slightly.

I look back at him, at the face that's so like mine and my other brothers'. An oval face with a high forehead, wide-set turquoise eyes, and nicely curved lips. Five different variants on the same basic idea, except my features are softer. I have fuller lips, and my blonde hair is one shade lighter.

I can barely remember my dad anymore—he died in an accident when I was five, while he was out baling hay—but everyone in the village says we Scriver kids all look just like him. Especially Ethan. It's pretty obvious from the photos, too.

The problem is that I know he means well. But it doesn't change the fact that sometimes he acts less like my brother and more like my personal dungeon-master.

"Why did you do that today?" he asks now.

I realize I probably do owe him some kind of explanation, and I can't lie to him again. "It was an admissions test," I tell him. "For the Hades in Love club."

"The what?"

He knows perfectly well what I said—the club existed back when he was in school. He's just saying it to show his disapproval as clearly as possible. He raises a reproachful eyebrow. "Aren't those the stuck-up chicks who wear a ton of Tommy Hilfiger and the look-at-me-I'm-so-tough guys?"

"You mean 'bad boys'?" I ask in a snide voice, although I know there's a grain of truth to his description. Of course only the popular kids are in the club. That's the whole reason I want to join. It's not like I don't have any other friends, but Emma and Elizabeth are like Ethan and Avery: deeply rooted in our village. And I'm sick of vegetating—I want to get out there and start living, before I end up as dried out as the sagebrush.

"You wouldn't fit in with them." Ethan ignores my snarky tone. "We're not super-rich, and you're not super-talented."

That stings, but I don't let it show. I try to remain calm and collected, like Liam. "And yet Ava and Madison asked me if I wanted

to join, imagine that!"

"Sure they did. But it was probably the boys that wanted you in. Maybe having a pretty face counts as a special talent. It certainly wasn't your amazing math skills that caught their attention."

I press my lips together to keep myself from hurling some cheap shot back at him, which would only mean even more punishment.

Ethan walks over to me and stops beside my chair. I keep my eyes stubbornly focused on the nick in the kitchen table—left there by a blade years ago, the time Jayden and I were playing knife-throwers. "To get anywhere in life, you need more than just a pretty face."

I roll my eyes. Not this again.

"Under the circumstances, I'm not sure I can let you do that modeling camp. It's not too late to cancel the reservation."

"What?" I exclaim in outrage. Model camp is going to be the highlight of my summer, and it took me a million years to convince Ethan to let me go. "Madison's mother is coming with us and staying right nearby. It's totally safe!"

"You're only five-five, you're too short to model anyway. And besides the fact that neither Ava nor Madison are model material, they're a bad influence. Madison drinks too much, and Ava jumps into bed with any guy who gives her the time of day."

I leap from my chair so forcefully that it scrapes across the ground. "You always ruin everything for me," I snap at him.

"You know we talked about this. You have to get your grades up first." Ethan is perfectly calm, which is not good at all. "Ms. Fitch tells me that you'd rather paint your nails in biology class than participate. You never do your math homework at all, and you're conspicuously absent from physics." He looks me over from head to toe, and then points to my pink-flowered sandals with the silver pearls. "Yesterday I got a bill from Stylight. For five things I doubt I'd wear even if I were a size extra-small and wore a women's eight and a half."

Crap. I totally forgot to tell him. I open my mouth to mount my defense, but Ethan keeps right on talking.

"My issue isn't with the two hundred dollars. It's with the fact that you used my credit card without asking and pretended to be Ethan Scriver."

"I'll pay you back, promise," I say hurriedly. "I just needed a cool outfit for Hades in Love, like, just in case—" I regret it the minute I say it.

And Ethan promptly sighs. "Hades will have to wait."

I stare daggers at him. "What do you mean, wait? You can't just forbid me from joining the club!"

"Lou." I hate it when he does that soft Mister-Nice-Guy voice. It leaves me defenseless, makes it impossible to argue with him. But he's not getting me that easily today! "I don't know what's going on in your life these days," he continues. "I look at you and I see a girl heading in the wrong direction for getting what she wants. What she really wants, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, like you've *ever* been interested in what I really want," I snap at him. "All you care about is whether I 'make something of myself,' whether I get good grades so I can get into college and live the life that you wish *you* had. But you could care less what *I* think about anything!"

His eyes bore into mine as he fishes his phone out of his jeans pocket, but then he turns his gaze to the screen and scrolls until he finds what he's looking for. "Hi, everybody out there," he reads aloud and glances up at me. I chew on my lip, already half-sure what he's reading. The next sentence confirms my suspicions. "Here in Ash Springs, the asphalt's melting in the sun again, and I'm hanging around and don't know what to do. Does anyone else ever feel like their life is like the monotone road from Ash Springs to Rachel? Like, nothing but dry sand and branches roasting in the heat? Don't you wish something would happen? Something that would grab you like an eagle and carry you into the air, until you can see the whole world from above? Something that makes you soar so high that the rays of the sun light up your heart? Something that turns you inside out and leaves behind a person you don't recognize? Do you dream about that too?"

When he finishes, I swallow. I posted that publicly to my Facebook wall, and when Ethan reads it, it sounds like a prayer demanding to be heard. By someone, somewhere out there.

"Trust me, I know how you feel," he says quietly. "I understand what you want." He slips the phone into his back pocket again. "But this isn't like the movies, it doesn't work like that. We should just be glad that Avery and I have jobs, and that we all have each other. Life can be worth living even if it isn't dramatic."

I study the doorframe intently. "So you're criticizing my dreams now?" I ask in a small voice.

"Mom and Dad would have wanted me to look after you, Lou. I can't just let you do whatever you want all the time."

"You always bring up Mom and Dad when you want me to feel guilty." My throat is closing up, and the words are hard to get out. "When you run out of arguments. But they're dead. They have no idea what my life is like, or yours. None. So who cares what they would have wanted? They'll never know you're here playing Mother Teresa!"

Ethan takes a deep breath, and I can see he's struggling to keep calm. Unlike him, I don't remember our mom at all. She died giving birth to me, and sometimes I wonder whether Ethan subconsciously blames me for it. Maybe that's why he's always so strict. He was twelve when it happened, so to him Mom is more than just a woman's face in a picture frame and a couple of anecdotes. And Dad, he practically idolized. When I think about Dad, I remember a sad man who didn't talk much and almost always smelled like horses and hay. Who rarely had time for me because he worked day and night. But Mom and Dad were everything to Ethan, and I don't know why I said those mean things to him. Maybe because he was comparing my dreams to movies, acting like they're worthless.

I start to apologize, but the way Ethan's shaking his head, with his lips pressed together adamantly like that, keeps me from saying anything.

"You can hurt me all you want, Louisa, but it doesn't change the situation," he says. "Even if you don't honor Mom and Dad's memory, I do. And I sure as hell am not going to let you go chasing

a ridiculous dream." He nods toward the door. "I'm going to drive up to your school now. Not everything is just about you this time, for once. Mr. Smith is going to be in a lot of trouble with the administration. If he's really unlucky, they'll call in the Board of Health, and he'll lose his job."

My jaw drops. "That's not true!"

Ethan turns to go, but then pauses and looks down at me. "Did you know he was color-blind?"

"Yeah."

"And you took advantage of it." He gives me a look of contempt.

I try to hold his gaze. "I didn't mean to get him in trouble. Really, Ethan. I'm sorry." Poor Mr. Smith. Ava makes fun of him sometimes because he's such a dumb old coot. I picture them grabbing him and hauling him out of the cafeteria. I feel bad for laughing at the things Ava said about him, even though I actually like Mr. Smith.

"You never mean to do anything," Ethan replies coolly. "And you're always sorry afterward. Maybe next time you'll think twice before you risk a man's job for a bunch of self-obsessed douchebags."

Quickly, I grab my phone and put it in my bag. "Let me come with you, Ethan, please! I can explain that I—"

"That won't do him any good anymore now. The point is, it shouldn't have happened in the first place. What if some nutjob had put poison into y'all's food?" Ethan sounds like even he can't entirely forgive Mr. Smith's inattention, although he knows perfectly well what happened.

"But it was just food dye," I protest weakly.

"It doesn't matter what it was, he neglected his duties. Don't worry, you can make your case to the principal tomorrow." Ethan points to my book. "You're staying home for the rest of the day. Do your homework, and help Jayden fix the rotten boards under the house. We'll talk about the consequences for your actions after dinner."

I nod, and he leaves. The creaking floorboards sound like they're sighing out his disappointment in me with every step he takes.

Although I'm still furious at him, I run over to the kitchen door. "Ethan."

He stops at the front door and looks over at me.

"I'm sorry I said that about Mom and Dad," I tell him quietly.

He nods, but the expression on his face is distant. "I know."

I do actually do my homework, or at least I try to, but months of slacking on algebra means the gaps in my knowledge are more like craters. Plus, I keep getting distracted thinking about Mr. Smith—and about all those rude things I said about Mom and Dad. For the first time, I start thinking maybe they would be just as disappointed in me as Ethan is. That they would think I was a superficial, irresponsible daydreamer whose only good quality was a pretty face. The idea hurts in a way I hadn't expected. Right now, I'm almost glad they're dead so they don't know about any of this.

After an hour of staring at the same equation, I give up. Maybe Jayden can help me later. Instead of moving on to bio, I empty the dishwasher. Motivated by my guilty conscience, I gather the colorful pile of clothes on my bedroom floor and dump it into the laundry bin in the bathroom, and then vacuum the entire house. Then I clean the bathroom as a surprise for Ethan, even though it's his turn to do it, and pick up all the empty yogurt containers and half-full chip bags in the living room.

Cleaning distracts me from sulking. And maybe when Ethan sees it, he'll go easier on me, as in not ground me until the end of the school year. The word "grounded" is so childish that it turns my stomach. Who actually gets grounded anymore?

As I knot the trash bag in the kitchen, I think about what the worst possible scenario could be. He threatened to cancel modeling camp, but he was probably just saying that because he was so mad. "Hades will have to wait"—yeah, okay, he might make me wait until next year to join the club. That would be sort of medium-catastrophic, mostly because I would have to tell Madison and Ava what happened. Hopefully the offer will still be on the table next year.

I mop the floor, too. Better safe than sorry. If I know Ethan, he'll just leave it at a lecture and a week or two of grounding. He can never stay mad at me for too long.

Jayden walks into the kitchen just as I'm pulling the overflowing trash bag out of the wastebasket. "What happened in here?" He runs a hand through his mussed hair, blinking like he just woke up. He always looks vaguely disoriented when he first steps away from one of his stories, like he's still remembering where he is. "The bathroom and the living room are, like, hospital clean," he says, motioning vaguely toward the hallway with his chin. "You could perform open-heart surgery in there." He regards me for a moment, and breaks into a grin. "What'd you do this time? I mean, besides the baby-blue potatoes? Judging from the cleanliness of the house, it must be something horrible, right? Did you poison Ms. Fitch?"

"You heard already?"

"What, you really did poison her?" His grin widens in amusement, though he obviously knows that wasn't what I meant.

"I hate to disappoint you," I mutter, pushing past him, "but Ms. Fitch is just fine. How did you hear about the potatoes?"

"Avery texted me."

"Traitor."

Jayden laughs. As withdrawn as he is around everyone else, he always seems perfectly relaxed in my presence, though I'm never totally sure what's going on in his head. "He's on his way home right now to cook you your favorite meal."

An uneasy feeling begins to spread in my stomach. Ethan probably called Avery and told him what I did. Maybe he even told Avery how he's going to punish me, and Avery thinks he needs to cook my favorite meal to make me feel better. That would be just like the two of them: Ethan's strict, Avery's a softie. Sometimes I feel like they're trying to replace Mom and Dad for me. If so, Avery's definitely the mom.

I take the trash down to the Dumpsters outside our fence. Liam's standing on his head now. If the President of the United States came on the air and announced that the world was ending, Liam would probably go right on doing yoga.

Later, after I've watered the young tomato plants and the string beans behind the veranda, I squeeze in beneath the house with Jayden. We lie there on our backs, shoulder to shoulder, with the wooden floorboards over us and the warm, red earth under us. There's barely three feet of headroom under here, and I feel like I've been buried alive. Thick swaths of cobwebs hang from the support beams. Not the slightest breeze gets through down here, which is why I keep having to put my forearm over my nose and breathe into my sweaty skin to get away from the musty smell.

"This one spot under the bathroom is almost totally busted." Jayden tugs at a plank he's just finished unscrewing with the battery-powered screwdriver in his hand. It snaps in half. "Good thing the floor has two layers—otherwise we might fall right through here while we're sitting on the toilet! We really need to figure out some better ventilation."

The thought of Ethan crashing straight through the floor with his pants around his ankles makes me grin. "Like a better bathroom vent?" I ask.

Jayden groans and laughs at the same time. "The vent in the bathroom doesn't do any good under the floor. I was thinking more like a ventilation system for underneath the house." He uses two fingers to peel away another hunk of rotten wood. "We need to get the air circulating down here."

I feel like a moron. How does he know things like that? He just turned eighteen three months ago, so he's only a year and a half older than I am.

"I looked it up for a novel," he explains as though reading my mind. "Board!"

I reach over to grab one of the boards beside me and pass it to him. "Do you think Mom and Dad would be disappointed in me?" I blurt out.

He stops short and turns his face toward me. Someday I'll probably see it in the New York Times, when he makes it onto the bestseller list. Jayden's totally on another level. He's not like Liam, whose whole life is one long journey to "find" himself. He's known what he wanted to do with his life ever since Avery read him his first

book, and he's been working tirelessly to make it happen ever since. He's probably the most ambitious of any of us. A kid Mom and Dad would be proud of. I get another sharp pain in my heart at the realization.

Jayden fixes me with a penetrating gaze. Tiny mosquitos cling to the sweat on his forehead. "That's ridiculous," he says after a moment, a shade too gruffly. "Why would you even think that?"

I confess everything. When I'm done, he whistles through his teeth, which doesn't make it better. "Ethan will get over it," he says then.

I know he's just trying to cheer me up. "Do you think I'm egotistical?" I ask him.

"Obviously."

"I'm serious, Jay. Tell me what you really think of me."

"You're my sister, what am I supposed to think? I think you're annoying."

"Jay!"

"Okay, okay. You're all right, overall."

I'd throw the pack of screws at him if I had room. "Overall?!"

"Like, in general, as a complete package. I mean, I don't think you're available as individual parts."

It makes me think of our old game, where one of us would describe something in three words and the other had to guess what it was. Nowadays, we do it the other way around sometimes. Describe Ash Springs in three words. Describe American history in three words.

"Describe me in three words," I say. "Pretend you're trying to characterize me for your novel, and you can only use three adjectives."

"Nobody would buy that novel." His eyes still light up at the challenge, but he takes his time about answering. First he screws the new board into place and loosens the screws on the next one. The boards creak up above somewhere behind us. Avery's probably home, starting the spaghetti. Or maybe it's Liam, coming in from his yoga session.

"Well?"

"Fun-loving, emotional, insecure." Jayden smiles to himself as he twists a screw into the hole. Hopefully he's not trying to imagine what kind of character I'd make in a book.

"Insecure? Why?"

"Because you need other people to tell you who you are."

"Ethan says I'm superficial, irrational, and difficult."

"And you believe that?"

"Isn't it true?"

Jayden shrugs his shoulders, which looks weird on a person lying on his back. "The negative way of saying fun-loving, emotional, and insecure."

He's given me a lot to think about. He goes on working—silently, which is normal for him—and I just lie there. Afterward I take a shower to scrub all the dirt off. I make sure to pick a top that isn't too low-cut and shorts that aren't too short—my "revealing" clothes are another thing that Ethan and I fight about constantly. He thinks dressing sexy is like advertising to guys that I'm easy. Or worse, that I'm one of those girls that guys like to think "no" means "yes" with. I asked him what went through *his* mind when he saw scantily clad women, but he waved the question away. Whatever. Tonight I have to make nice, so I slip on a coral-colored blouse trimmed with lace and a pair of dark-blue shorts that go to just above my knees. Then I braid my hair so it'll be wavy in the morning.

When I emerge from my room, the house is already filled with the delicious scents of garlic and fresh basil. I join Avery in the kitchen and snag a couple of the diced sun-dried tomatoes. He gives me a comforting hug, even though I'm the one who's done something wrong.

"Did Ethan say anything to you?" I ask.

Avery makes an indistinct gesture. His face is most like mine, softer than our other brothers', which makes him look a lot younger than twenty-six. Most people think Liam's older, but he's only twenty-two.

"You're not allowed to tell me," I realize after a few more moments of silence.

"Ethan wants you to hear it from him." Avery stirs the pot of pasta, avoiding my gaze.

"That sounds bad."

"I don't think you're going to like it."

"Can't you just tell me? Come on, Avery, I have to be prepared!" I pluck at his sleeve and gaze up at him with a doe-eyed look that almost always works on him.

"You sure did it this time," he says evasively.

"Is that why you're cooking for me?"

"Oh, Louisa," he sighs, turning back to the stove. Maybe he's disappointed in me too. "Ethan just wants you to be able to go to college. You should get a proper degree so you don't end up on a farm."

"You guys enjoy working for Mr. Goodman, though."

"I never wanted to do anything else, but Ethan's not like me... I mean, he had to take the job because we needed the money."

"But I'm not Ethan!" I protest, pushing aside the thought that Ethan had probably sacrificed a lot in life because of us. "Maybe I don't want to go to college."

"What do you want to do, then?"

"I don't know yet."

"See? And as long as you don't know, you should be trying as hard as you can. When you don't make an effort, to Ethan it's like you're just spitting on all his hard work and sacrifices."

I pull some dishes out of the cupboard and start setting the table. "You've said yourself that he's too strict."

Avery turns back around, still holding his cooking spoon. "I'm just trying to explain how he feels."

Normally Ethan is the one explaining how I feel. The anxious feeling in my stomach has been growing ever since I first saw the food, and now it's a hard knot. I'm starting to suspect that he's planning to do something way worse than just ground me.

We eat in awkward silence. Ethan is at the head of the table, his face inscrutable, and the others don't seem particularly approachable, either. I guess they probably all know. The sound of forks scraping against plates is fraying my nerves, and I almost choke a couple of times because the spaghetti with tomatoes and pine nuts keeps getting tangled in my mouth. I feel Ethan's eyes on me. He didn't say one word about how clean the place was—he just asked me about my homework. When I confessed that I hadn't gotten past the first problem, he simply turned away, which was worse than getting yelled at.

After Avery and I have cleared the table and sat down again, my trial begins.

Ethan starts by listing off my many misdeeds with stoic calm: faking his signature, faking my identity online, using his credit card without permission, failing my math test, lying, skipping class, sneaking in through the back door of the cafeteria, dyeing the mashed potatoes blue—which was thoughtless, he adds, and will have consequences as yet unknown. And then there are my bad grades in biology and physics, and the "Ms. Fitch, The Bitch" graffiti Ava and I did on the gym wall... all of which Ethan just found out about today.

Even I have to admit that it's a pretty sizeable list, though to me it sounds like a bunch of minor stuff. "Ava was the one who actually sprayed that," I say meekly, and it's true: I just kept watch and acted like I thought it was cool so Ava wouldn't think I was boring.

Ethan doesn't acknowledge my protest any more than he did the clean house. "This wasn't an easy decision, Louisa," he begins, and then glances around the table like a king regarding his subjects before issuing a new decree. His gaze comes to rest on me. "Long story short, Hades will have to get along without you next year."

His words hang in the air between us. They can't possibly be true. "All next year?" Mind. Blown. He's actually serious. "You can't do that!" I ball my fists under the table in fury and try to hold back the tears forming in my eyes. "What's so bad about the club? You're always saying how important it is to have good friends."

"Do you seriously believe you're going to find real friends in that snobby clique? The sole purpose of that club is to belittle nonmembers to make themselves look better."

"Ava and Madison are okay."

"Besides, you have good friends. Emma and Elizabeth, for example."

Emma and Elizabeth are nice but boring, though I'd probably better not say that out loud right now. "Can't you think of a different way to punish me?"

"You really think that's it?" Ethan shakes his head in disbelief.

My eyes widen. "Isn't it?"

"I canceled model camp. You're coming on vacation with us instead."

Now I can barely breathe. "You expect me to go camping with you guys in the wilderness? You're out of your mind!"

Ethan goes right on talking, unmoved. "Enjoying nature, getting some fresh air, and being somewhere without commercialism or Facebook will all do you good. Oh, right, and speaking of Facebook: your account is being deactivated for the next six months, and you're only allowed to use the Internet for homework purposes. You're also grounded until the start of the next school year."

"Until the start of—that's in August! It's May!"

"That's correct."

"And the end-of-year party..."

"No parties. No sleeping over at friends' houses. Nothing."

I'm utterly speechless. My lips are trembling, but I definitely, definitely do not want to start crying. I never would have thought he'd go this far, that he'd ruin my entire life!

Avery lays his hand on my arm. "It'll be fun, Lou, you'll see. We're going to some national parks. We're going camping, and we'll see the giant sequoias, and there are lots of waterfalls in Yosemite... and we might even spot some elk or caribou."

I shake his hand off. A million thoughts are racing through my head, but before I can turn them into a sentence, Ethan starts talking again.

"From now on, every night when I get home, we're going to review a chapter of your math book. Hopefully by the end of summer break you'll be caught up to the others."

"I have to study during vacation?"

Ethan allows himself a smile that makes me want to strangle him. "It's not like you'll have anything else to do. If necessary, I'll bring your books with us on the camping trip."

"You're only doing this because I said that stuff about Mom and Dad," I manage to stammer, and a tear runs down my cheek. Impatiently, I wipe it away and jump out of my seat. I glance over at my other brothers. Jayden's staring at the table, Avery's trying to keep his expression as breezy as possible, and Liam is rolling some herbs he picked himself into a cigarette. Not one of them is taking my side—Ethan must have prepped them in advance. For my own good, of course! I feel betrayed and abandoned by them all.

"I'm sorry, Louisa," Ethan says as he rises to his feet and comes toward me. "You have to learn to show responsibility. Food dye has no business being in school food, just like your most personal hopes and dreams have no business being on a public Facebook wall. I genuinely think this is what's best for you."

He tries to put a hand on my shoulder, but I jerk away, shaking my head vehemently. "No, it's what's best for you, so that you can feel great about yourself!" I choke out. "Maybe I should just leave! Then all your worries will go away, and I finally won't have to be around you anymore! That would seriously be the best thing that ever happened to me!"

I storm out of the room. Before I slam the door, I hear Liam and Jay reasoning with Ethan.

None of them stuck up for me. I really do wish I could just start packing!

CHAPTER 2

I'm sitting cross-legged on the forest floor, staring into the glowing coals in the grill tray. Dry needles are pricking my thighs, and I keep having to flick ants off of my shins and back to their trail. *What a great vacation*!

We haven't even been here three hours and I already feel totally inept. After I broke the middle tent pole as I was putting it together and then accidentally tore the outside of Ethan's sleeping bag with the sharp end, he released me of all further duties. So that I wouldn't do any more damage.

I really was making an effort, though. I want to give this vacation a chance, like I promised Avery I would yesterday. Maybe it won't be as terrible as I'm expecting.

Our car and our tent are nestled within a ring of boulders and ancient sequoias, with wild hawthorn and massive branches filling the gaps in between, so we're fairly well isolated from our camping neighbors.

Earlier, as we were driving from the visitors' center to our campsite, I spotted a sparkling green mountain stream. With a warning sign about bears right next to it. Obviously, nobody told me that there are black bears here. Either my brothers didn't want to upset me, or they assumed that it was just common knowledge. At any rate, I'm going out first thing tomorrow to get myself some bear spray, just in case. The thought of black bears slinking around here

makes me kind of nervous. I keep checking into the bushes, but all I see are the outlines of other people's tents and a couple of chipmunks.

I whirl around in terror when I hear a muted rustling behind me, but it's only Liam, setting up a camping table beside a picnic bench anchored into the ground. The few rays of sunshine piercing the canopy overhead cast a net of shimmering light around us, with ghostly shadows dancing among them like tiny insects. It'll be dark in about an hour, so we have to get the tent up and dinner ready by then. I could help Liam, of course, but Ethan did tell me not to touch anything else until dinner.

Out of boredom, I grab a stick and start poking the coals.

"Hey, Lou, quit it!" I hear Ethan call. "You'll make the embers go out!"

Even from inside that crooked tent, he seems to be keeping an eye on me.

I make a face at him behind his back. He always manages to make me feel like a toddler. Spitefully, I start jabbing the stick around the edge of the coals even more. Acrid smoke promptly billows into my face, and my eyes begin to water. Liam laughs. I throw the branch aside with a scowl. Ava and Madison are off hooking up with super-hot guys at model camp while I'm stuck here with my brothers. The one highlight of my entire vacation will probably be a couple of unshaven nature freaks in hiking boots that look like survivalist street vendors with all their gear. *Psst, hey, kid, wanna buy some bear spray?*

Thanks a lot, Ethan! I've barely spoken to him since that horrible night. Only during our tutoring sessions, and only when absolutely necessary. After a couple of days, I wanted to ask him to take away at least part of the punishment, but at the last minute my pride got in the way. Weirdly, apologizing to Mr. Smith was easier than any of the rest, especially since he got to keep his job and my little prank didn't have any other serious consequences.

Once that was certain, I asked Liam to talk to Ethan again for me. But Liam's opinion doesn't count in Ethan's eyes, so then Jayden was up. Ethan values Jayden's opinion quite a bit, but this time my

youngest brother's pleas fell on deaf ears. And the day before yesterday, Avery sat me down for a chat.

So I'm going to try to make the best of the situation, for Avery's sake, Liam's, and Jayden's.

Which is why I clamber to my feet now and help Liam with the camping table after all. After that, I go to the car, pull the plastic tablecloth out of my backpack, and spread it over the table.

"Lou!" I hear Ethan call.

I ignore him and go back to fetch the dishes from the transport case. Despite everything, he still acts like everything is fine between us. Well, sure, he got his way, so as far as he's concerned, everything *is* fine! The fact that he's derailing my whole life doesn't seem to interest him in the slightest. On my last Facebook post, I wrote that I had to leave Facebook for a while. I didn't explain why—telling everyone that my own brother is punishing me with that would be way, way too embarrassing. Instead, I posted our travel route. Ethan, obviously, used it as yet another reason to get all furious at me. I don't know why, but I just needed to do it. If the rest of the world isn't going to hear anything from me, they ought to at least know where I am. Otherwise it's almost like I don't exist, strange as that sounds.

"Louisa!" It's Ethan again, more annoyed this time.

I act like I'm engrossed in my work.

"You can go ahead and grab the camping lanterns. It gets dark fast out here!"

I remember the promise I made to Avery. "Where are they?"

"How would I know? You were the one who was supposed to pack them. I specifically put them in your room."

"Dammit." Hopefully Ethan didn't hear me say that under my breath. I open the trunk and start rummaging around in my backpack, even though I know I'm not going to find them in there. They're still sitting next to my bedroom door.

"I think I forgot them," I call to Ethan, just as Avery returns from the visitors' center with a sack of firewood, a bag of potatoes, and a six-pack of beer. He heaves the wood and the potatoes onto a bench, sets the beer beside them, and then flops down himself.

"You're kidding!" Ethan is beside me within seconds. He tears my bag away from me and starts yanking my clothes out. Shorts, lace tops, and ruffled T-shirts land on the dirty cargo liner.

"Watch out!" I grab a white blouse out of his hand.

"Don't tell me these are the only clothes you brought." He stares, baffled, at the particularly tight T-shirt he's holding, which has a brightly colored necklace caught on the hem.

I cross my arms. "That's all. So what?"

"No long pants? No sweaters? Where are your hiking boots?"

"I can hike in my Chucks."

"Or in those things, which you still haven't paid me back for," Ethan sneers, gesturing at my flowered sandals. He continues searching my bag, and curses to himself when he sees my arsenal of cosmetics and bracelets. "Where, exactly, did you think we were camping at? A spa hotel?"

"If I have to come, I'm going to wear what I want to wear."

"And where are the camping lanterns?" Ethan glowers at me.

"I forgot them, like I just said." I cringe inwardly, bracing myself to get chewed out.

Ethan takes a deep breath. "You really are completely useless." He says it loud enough for anyone within a hundred feet to hear. "It's not like I asked you to remember a hundred things. Just the two lanterns and the tablecloth. That's it. Three things. That shouldn't be too hard, even for you."

"Sorry," I snap, trying to mask how much that hurt.

"Maybe you left them behind on purpose," he sighs in resignation.

"I did not! I just forgot them!" My face heats up in rage.

"Like you forgot your math stuff?" Ethan pushes me away from the trunk and slams it shut. Then he reaches into his pants pocket and slaps a few dollar bills into my hand. "Go to the visitors' center and buy two new ones. Now."

He says it like I'm a total idiot, and it's completely demeaning. We really do need lanterns, though, and it's totally my fault that we don't have them.

"Can I get some bear spray too, then?" I ask, making every effort to sound friendly.

Ethan stares at me like I've officially lost my mind. "I wouldn't give you bear spray if there were a grizzly right in front of our tent. You would somehow manage to spray us all and leave us totally defenseless. Anyway, you wouldn't have the guts to use it in an emergency."

"But I'm scared of bears!" I insist stubbornly.

He gives me a look of pure contempt. "Just the lanterns. That's it. Got it?"

"Maybe I'll just get in the next bus I see and go home, then." The words are tumbling out before I can stop them. "Or somewhere else!" My voice sounds whiny, and I hate myself for it. I hate myself for letting Ethan provoke me into acting like a small child, instead of a sixteen-year-old, almost seventeen-year-old.

"Yeah, yeah, sure." He waves dismissively. "Make sure you don't get in the wrong bus." His grin is cruel. And patronizing. It makes me completely forget my promise to Avery.

"And you think you can replace Dad for me," I shout. "But Dad would never have been so mean to me. He would have never told me that I'm useless. Never! I hate you!" I turn around and stalk off.

I hope a sequoia branch falls on his head and kills him!

As I trot down the gravel road toward the visitors' center, I try to push the whole conversation with Ethan out of my mind, but his words keep circling around me like the blades of a windmill. *Shouldn't be hard, even for you. You really are completely useless.*

I *do* feel like jumping onto the next bus I see, just to get back at Ethan. I know it would be childish of me, but he'd be getting what he deserved for talking down to me like that. Then I count the bills crumpled in my fist and realize that thirty bucks isn't going to get me home anyway. Scowling, I shove the money into my shorts pocket, and then stick my hands under my armpits because I'm suddenly freezing, like the temperature just dropped twenty degrees from one minute to the next. It's gotten darker, too. And quieter. I hadn't

realized just how loudly the gravel was crunching under the soles of my sandals.

I glance around. A couple of gigantic crows are sitting near the big Dumpster, picking at crumbs left behind by other campers. Uneasily, I peer into the thick trees looking for black bears, but all I see are green and brown tents, campfires, people in outdoor gear... and trees, hundreds and hundreds of trees. Everything else looks so tiny next to them, like a bunch of toys. The shadows around their bare trunks are beginning to swallow the flickering sunlight, as if they're strangling it with their evil claws... or maybe getting ready to leap at me from the darkness.

There. Wasn't something moving back there, between those two trees? Something dark, like a cross between a man and a bear? I freeze in place for a second and then retreat back to the center of the gravel road. I squint into the forest, but then shake my head at my own ridiculousness. Why wouldn't there be things moving in there? This place is full of people, even if there aren't technically any tents in the part I'm walking through right now. Maybe the public toilets they mentioned earlier are back there? I set off down the road again. The visitors' center isn't far now, maybe a quarter mile away, on the other side of the main road running through the park. I can already see the brightly lit entrance from here.

But I still can't shake the sense that someone or something is walking along beside me, and keeps slipping behind the nearest tree every time I look in that direction.

Heart racing, I tug my paper-thin blouse up to cover my shoulders. *Quit showing so much skin, Louisa,* I hear Ethan say. *Don't tell me you've never heard anyone say, "If she didn't want it she wouldn't have been dressed like that."*

I glance into the trees again, and this time I'm sure I saw it. Something long, wild, scurrying into a shadow as though it were part of the forest itself.

I start walking faster now, keeping my eyes straight ahead. It's not far at all now—I'm already in the RV park. To get there faster, I veer off onto a narrow path winding past the individual campsites. In

my anxiety, I run smack into a clothesline spanned between two trees, and curse loudly as I break into a near-jog.

A branch snaps somewhere nearby. I glance toward it and feel a hand on my shoulder. I want to scream, but everything happens too fast. The hand jerks me around.

"Lou! Wait up already!"

I smack the hand away reflexively. "Jay," I wheeze. "You scared me to death. What are you doing sneaking up behind me?"

"I wasn't sneaking, I just took a shortcut." He grins, and for a moment I wonder whether this is some kind of test he's running for one of his stories. How would a teenaged girl react to a mysterious threat in the forest? But no—Jay may be ambitious, but he wouldn't go that far.

"Don't you ever do that again!" I snap. My heart is still hammering in my chest. "I thought you were a... oh, never mind." Suddenly, it dawns on me. "Ethan sent you to make sure I didn't run away."

Jay shakes his head. "He doesn't mean it like that. He just wants to protect you."

"Is that what you came out here to tell me?"

"I came out here to make sure everything was okay."

"Ethan hates me! He thinks I'm worthless!" I'm almost shocked at myself for saying it aloud. This is the first time I'm realizing that I genuinely believe it. There's a dull pressure in my chest. Anger goes away eventually, so does disappointment. But contempt is more intense, it runs deeper. It's harder to fight.

"Bullshit!" Jayden retorts energetically. "Ethan loves you. If he hates anyone, it's himself, because he can't help being so hard on you."

You really are completely useless. I'm not sure what to think anymore. I'm pretty sure I've just disappointed Ethan once too often, and at some point, his disappointment turned into contempt. Which is why he doesn't even care anymore if I say hurtful things to him.

I turn away. "Just leave me alone so I can buy the stupid lanterns in peace," I mutter. Maybe I can do this one thing right.

"Are you sure?" Jay sounds wary.

I turn back around and force myself to smile at him, so that he'll leave me alone. "I'm sure!" With that, I leave him standing there.

The visitors' center is warm and brightly lit, with wood paneling on the walls and ceiling that gives it a cozy feel. The whole room smells like the French fries and fresh-brewed coffee at the kiosk in the far corner. I wish I could just spend the night in here instead of shivering in the cold, listening to my brothers snore. Bringing me along was so dumb of Ethan, especially because now there'll be five of us squished into a four-person tent.

Thinking about Ethan brings back that funny feeling in my stomach. Knowing someone's mad at me is bad enough, but I totally can't deal with people looking down on me. Maybe I should use this vacation as a chance to show Ethan that I'm not as irresponsible as he thinks. If I'm on my very best behavior all summer, maybe he'll even change his mind about letting me be in Hades in Love this fall. Anyway, I did promise Avery I would make nice.

I rub my arms, still shivering a little, as I look around the visitors' center. It's a one-story building divided into two sections. One side is full of tourist brochures; the other is where they make money off of campers who forgot stuff at home. Out through the other exit is where the park ranger said they have proper toilets and showers—thank God!

I saunter up and down the aisles, searching for the lanterns. The sales area is like a mini-grocery store, except obscenely overpriced. Eight ounces of Starbucks iced coffee for ten dollars. Sandwiches for eleven. Seriously? I thought camping was supposed to be cheap?

Eventually, I drift over to a rack of hoodies. A grey one with a green hood says Sequoia National Park in big letters across the front. Maybe I should buy that instead of the lanterns? I really didn't bring anything long-sleeved, and it's already freezing outside. I slide it over to look at the one behind it. *Keep calm and camp on*, it says underneath a picture of a grizzly bear. Very funny. I wander off

again, and soon find myself in the alcove with the camping equipment. The bear spray is the first thing that catches my eye.

I reach for the can. *Animal repellent spray. Works up to 30 feet away. $50.*

Well, great. I wouldn't have fifty bucks if I asked Ethan for a month's allowance in advance. Plus I still owe him for the clothes. With a sigh, I put the can back, and my gaze drifts to the entrance, just as a guy in dark clothing walks in through the open glass doors. I stare at him as though hypnotized. Black cargo pants, black hoodie. It's not his outfit I'm fascinated by, though. It's something in his expression. I can't place it. I just know it's got my attention.

I take a deep breath and look away. If Madison were here, she'd say he was hot like fire and call dibs on him. Ava would probably be squeezing my wrist to death. Dammit, if Ethan hadn't taken my phone away I could have taken a sneaky picture of him.

In an effort to look busy, I pick up the bear spray again and act like I'm studying the ingredients, though in reality I'm watching Hoodie Guy from across the lid of the can. His dark hair is slightly too long to be neat, but it doesn't seem unkempt. More like... rakish. He looks like a guy who's not afraid to take risks.

With one quick motion, I slide the ponytail holder out of my hair and smooth it down. Maybe he'll notice me yet. You never know!

He's standing in front of the freezer case now, reaching for... are those fish sticks? Lord, I wouldn't have pegged him as a fish sticks kind of guy. He looks like a steak guy. Rare, I bet. As if in a trance, I watch him pull out iced coffee—not the Starbucks one—and a couple of frozen donuts. All things I love!

Suddenly, as if sensing me sneaking glances at him behind the bear spray, he turns around and looks at me from across the room. He has a questioning look on his face, almost like he's wondering if he's done something wrong. Or like he's astonished that I'm looking at him. Like he can't believe he's caught my attention.

I can't even move. I just go right on staring at him like a complete psychopath. *Goddammit, Lou, get your shit together already!*

Before I can make myself smile, I realize that he's already turned away and gone to the cash register. He pays with a bill he fishes out of his pocket and then turns to leave. But he's heading for the alcove, not the glass doors.

Help! He's coming this way! Maybe he wants to know why I'm gawking at him. Or he forgot something. Or he just wants to chat.

I grip the bear spray in both hands, gazing at it like I'm in spiritual communion with the ingredients list, wondering if he's actually walking in my direction. Half of me desperately hopes he is; the other half has basically shut down, and taken whatever's left of my rational mind with it.

I really, seriously think he's coming over here.

Quickly, I spin around and run my thumbnail between my front teeth to make sure there's nothing stuck in there if he does talk to me. What am I wearing again? Oh, right, the white blouse with the billowy lace sleeves, the long chain with a bunch of multi-colored pendants, and my jean shorts. No hiking boots, fortunately. Then again, maybe he's into that kind of thing.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him step into the alcove and position himself in front of the shelf holding flashlights, lanterns, and batteries. He's using one forearm to hold the frozen foods neatly against his stomach—his slender, toned stomach, at least from what I can tell from his baggy clothes. He seems pretty athletic in general, based on the way he moves. Like a panther, whose deadly strength you barely notice beneath its elegant grace.

I could ask him whether he knows about camping stuff, and it wouldn't even be a pretense, because I don't have the first clue about camping lanterns. But I just stand there tongue-tied, feeling my cheeks starting to burn. Hoodie Guy looks like he's out of high school already. Twenty-two, maybe? Older? *Way too old for you,* Ethan would say.

Perfect, Ava whispers seductively in my head. I don't remember the last time a boy threw me this far off my game. Well, not a boy. Definitely not a boy.

"The bear spray is useless," he says out of the blue, without turning around. "Total scam." His voice is dark, gravelly, confident. It

only amplifies my insecurity. I stare at his back, wracking my brain feverishly, trying to come up with a reply before he thinks I'm deaf or dumb or both.

"Or at least I don't know anyone that's successfully taken out a bear with it." He turns and gives me a brief smile.

I can feel my heart pounding in my throat, and all I can do is pray that he doesn't notice how nervous I am. He's even better-looking up close. His eyes are dark, nearly black, framed by long, thick lashes. Bedroom eyes, Ava whispers. My gaze travels around his face: thin, well-defined lips; a nose that isn't too big or too small. His cheekbones are unusual—they stand out so much that they actually have thin shadows underneath them. The shadows give him an unapproachable air. Unapproachable, but vulnerable. Which is probably the thing about him that got my attention so fast.

He gestures casually to the can in my hand. "All that stuff is going to do is provoke them. In fact, if you're super unlucky, it'll make them want to attack you. Especially if your aim is off." He takes a step toward me. He smells like firewood, salt, and woods, but there's another sweet, pungent smell mixed in that I can't identify. Some kind of chemical. Cleaning fluid, maybe.

I still can't get a smile out. He seems so perfectly controlled, so experienced. He's probably talked to hundreds of girls. Anything that comes out of my mouth is going to be totally stupid. If I ever manage to say another word again.

"You must not go camping much," he says, as if to help me get over my shyness. Which of course he knows how to do, because I'm sure this isn't the first time that a girl has gone speechless at the sight of him.

"But what if there's suddenly one in front of me?" I blurt out. "Um, a... a bear, I mean...?" I could seriously smack myself for stammering like this. Soooo embarrassing.

Hoodie Guy either didn't hear it or is very smooth about ignoring it. "Stand still. Keep calm." He smiles again, this time with a strange gleam in his eyes. Maybe he's happy to discover that I know how to talk after all. "Just wait until it goes away. If it keeps coming closer,

you should sing or clap your hands—loud noises will scare most black bears off."

"Okay," I say in a near-whisper, setting the can back on the shelf. "I'm supposed to buy a camping lantern," I quickly add, not wanting him to leave. "Do you know anything about them?"

"To hang, or to put on the table?" He looks at me. His pupils are gigantic—nearly to the outer edge of his irises. I heard somewhere that people's pupils get bigger when they like the person they're talking to. The thought of him thinking I'm pretty gives me a tiny bit more courage. Maybe I really am pretty. Even Ethan says that.

"To put on the table." I clear my throat a little so that my voice will sound more confident, and toy nervously with my pendant. "I forgot our lanterns at home, and my brother sent me to buy new ones."

He nods like he already knows, and I wonder whether he heard our argument. Ethan was pretty loud. If he did hear anything, though, he doesn't say so. Instead, he plucks a lantern from one of the upper shelves that I wouldn't have been able to reach on my own. Wow, he's tall. At least as tall as Avery. Six-one, maybe six-two. I barely come up to his chin, if that. "Solarez are the best. They give off plenty of light without blinding you."

I act like I'm looking more closely at the lantern, but all I can really see are his long, slim fingers wrapped around it. There's a faint scar across the back of his left hand. For some reason, I like it.

"I'm Louisa," I suddenly tell him.

"Bren." His pupils have swallowed his entire iris now. Is he on drugs or something? I'm not sure how to tell. He seems too lucid to be high, though. His gaze seems to penetrate straight into my core, almost like he's trying to tell me something. Like there's something I need to understand. But what?

"Just Bren?" I hear myself ask from a million miles away.

He blinks, and the moment passes. "Brendan." Now he's the one speaking softly, as if his name's a secret he's only revealing to me. He glances over his shoulder, toward the cash register. The cashier's back is to us; he's organizing a rack next to the counter. Bren sweeps his gaze across the shelves.

My optimism shrivels to approximately walnut size. Probably searching for his girlfriend. What was I thinking? Of course a guy who looks like Brendan is going to have a girlfriend.

"I've gotta go," he says abruptly and presses the lantern into my hand. "Maybe I'll see you around."

I smile to hide my disappointment. "Are you staying a while?" I ask anyway.

His gaze drifts through the room again. "Couple more days."

"Same here."

"Yeah." He gives me a goodbye nod. "Later."

"Later." I watch him exit through the glass doors, still holding the frozen foods and the iced coffee against his stomach.

I stay standing there for a minute or two longer, feeling like I'm in some kind of dream. Finally, I look down at the lantern in my hand. It's fourteen dollars, practically the same as the iced coffee. Crazy. I ask the cashier to get me a second one from the shelf, but my mind is still on Brendan. I should have told him about model camp. I bet that would have impressed him, and then he wouldn't have taken off so soon. Although maybe he would have just thought it was me being a dumb, naive teenaged girl. Yeah, probably better I didn't mention it. He didn't look like the easily impressed type. What type *did* he look like? As I pay for the lanterns, I try to play the three-word description game on Brendan. Confident... daring... and...

Hm. Too many choices. Hot? Exciting? Wild? Vulnerable? Intense?

If there was one thing he had going for him, it was that he didn't talk or act like I was completely useless. He actually managed to distract me from Ethan.

Lost in thought, I walk back out into the visitors' center parking lot. It's already dusk; reddish-gold rays of sunlight are fanning out through the gathering blue-grey clouds. It'll be dark soon. The thought of having to walk the whole way back to our campsite makes me shiver—partly from cold, partly because the forest looks more sinister than ever. I wish I hadn't sent Jay away. I fumble with the switch on one of the camping lanterns, and then the other, but they stay dark. Ethan probably would have thought I was stupid for

even trying, but sometimes batteries are included, right? Not this time, though.

With one lantern in each hand, I set off across the parking lot. From a distance, I see a dark figure approaching. His determined stride reminds me of Ethan's, but when he gets closer, I recognize Bren.

He seems to have put the stuff he bought away already.

"Hey, Louisa."

I stop in my tracks, surprised that he's talking directly to me. His expression is serious, almost contemplative. "Bad news," he says in a clipped tone and gives me a once-over, as though assessing me somehow.

"What?" Involuntarily, I grip the lanterns more tightly. Hopefully it's not about my brothers. Then again, how would he know about them?

"There's a mama black bear with her cubs right by the Dumpsters."

I feel the blood drain from my face. "That's exactly the direction I'm going."

"You'd better wait until they leave. Mother bears always get crazy aggressive if they think someone's threatening their cubs. Some idiot forgot to lock one of the Dumpsters. Same thing happens every year. It may be hours before they finish eating."

My thoughts begin to race. If I don't show up back at camp soon, they'll come searching for me, and then they'll run straight into the arms of that mama bear. "I have to get back."

Bren shakes his head, pursing his thin lips. "You can't get past there."

"But my brothers..." I glance over my shoulder toward the visitors' center. "They'll be looking for me. We should tell the rangers. I've gotta—"

Bren raises a placating hand. "Louisa, the rangers are already there, making sure everyone's safe. They're not going to let anyone get anywhere near the bears."

"Really?"

He nods.

"And they'll be on both sides of the Dumpsters?"

"Um, of course, why wouldn't they be?"

I breathe a sigh of relief. Rangers have guns, and they're allowed to shoot bears in emergency situations. And when my brothers see them, they'll realize that I'm waiting on the other side.

"There's always some idiot trying to take pictures," Bren explains now. "This one tourist in Canada even tried to get his daughter to ride on a grizzly's back."

"No way!"

"I swear to God! But nothing happened."

I have to laugh, and he joins in with a brief, loud "ha ha." It's barely a laugh at all, but it changes his face for a moment, softens those rough, unapproachable shadows, makes him look younger.

"I was headed back to the visitors' center." Bren takes the lanterns out of my hands. Why, I don't know, but somehow it feels natural. "Forgot tomatoes. But if you want to get back to your brothers, I can drive you around the long way to your campsite."

"There's another road?" I blink, baffled. "The ranger didn't mention that." Unless he did and I just wasn't paying attention. Again.

"There's three, actually, but the third will be blocked off, too, because it's too close to the Dumpsters. People don't take the other route much, because it goes a few miles through the forest, and it's got a million potholes." His eyes shift to my bare shoulder. The blouse has slipped down again, nearly to my elbow. Automatically, I pull it up a little. He looks up, directly into my eyes. The intensity of his gaze hits me again. "You shouldn't walk that whole way by yourself. Really."

For half a second, I think about all the things Ethan is always warning me about, but then the sun emerges from behind a grey mountain of clouds and the entire sky seems to drown in the blood red of the setting sun. Everything is glowing, radiant. The towering sequoias behind Bren look like they're about to burst into flame.

"What about your tomatoes? Don't you want to go grab them first?"

He waves the question away. “I’m right over there, a little ways down the road.” The sunlight flickers in his eyes, tiny pinpoints of red dancing across his black irises, or pupils, I’m not sure. And there’s that feeling again, the one I got in the visitors’ center. The feeling that he wants to tell me something. Or is it a question he’s only asking me in his mind?

Do you want this?

A faint tingling sensation pulses through my veins. It could mean anything.

Do you want to come with me?

Do you want to sleep with me?

Do you want something to happen?

The key ring jingles in his hand like an invitation. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a man hoisting a backpack from the trunk of his car. Bren glances over at him, and I follow his gaze. The man shoulders the bag and heads straight for the visitors’ center. Otherwise, the lot is completely empty.

Bren turns away from the man to look at me again. “It’s not far.”

I nod, and he moves around to walk beside me, between me and the center.

Ethan would kill me if he knew I was getting into a stranger’s car. But he doesn’t know the situation. Besides, Bren is too hot to turn down. I guess there’s also a chance he’s hoping something will happen if he drives me. Maybe he wants to get to know me. Or more than that. Which is what makes this so exciting.

Do you want this?

My heart is racing as I walk next to him. I take a deep breath. I feel like I’m sensing everything around me at once: the rhythmic rustling of the treetops, the scent of pine needles and smoke, the wind on my skin, Bren’s keys jingling, the sound of the camping lanterns clacking together in his other hand.

“You’re shivering,” he says suddenly.

“I’m fine.”

He gives me a sidelong look, and then smiles like he knows better. We leave the parking lot and continue down the main street. Within minutes, the sky changes from reddish gold to grey. “We’re

almost there." Bren points straight ahead. I can barely make out a camper bus parked in a pull-off area a short distance from the road.

My stomach knots. Is he traveling with his wife and kids? Maybe he's older than I thought, and he's just being nice to me because he saw me holding the bear spray so he knows I'm scared of bears. Maybe he only offered to drive me because he's a responsible guy who doesn't want a girl walking around in the woods alone.

"So you're here with your family?" I can't stop myself from asking.

His face darkens for a second, but he smiles the shadows away as soon as I see them. "Just me."

"I pictured you with a car and a tent."

He raises an eyebrow. "Is there a difference between tent guys and RV guys?"

Is he making fun of me? I shrug uncertainly. "Um. You just... looked like a tent guy, I dunno." I hope he's not mad. "I guess I thought maybe because you know so much about... bears and stuff."

He smiles. Thank God. "The bus gives me more flexibility." His keys clink against his cargo pants.

"It's huge," I realize. "You could fit a family of five in there."

"I need space. Sometimes I spend the whole summer on the road."

"So what do you do in winter?" The question is out before I can bite it back. I'm too damn nosy.

"Work."

"Oh." Now I feel dumb. Like, obviously, if you spend the whole summer traveling around, you have to earn money sometime.

We've reached the camper. *Travel America*, it says in red-and-blue striped letters across the side. I wonder what it's like going on vacation all by yourself in this gigantic RV. Is Bren a loner? He doesn't look like one. But you can't tell that Jayden's a loner at first glance, either.

Bren walks to the passenger-side door, unlocks it, and pulls on the handle, but the door doesn't open. "Ah, fuck," he groans. "Stuck again." He yanks on the door grip as hard as he can, but nothing

happens. He turns to me with a sheepish grin and shrugs. "Sorry. You mind getting in the back and then climbing up front?"

"No problem," I say, but all at once I'm starting to get a bad feeling. I don't know why, though. I mean, I'm standing here with the single most attractive human being in California. Ava would probably walk across broken glass for a chance to sleep with him. Everything's fine. The passenger-side door sticks, no big deal.

Bren opens the back door on the side, which leads into the living area. Over his shoulder, I see a small yellow kitchen island and a table with benches. It's pretty dark in here, though. When he steps aside to let me through, I hesitate, peering into the camper again. There's a dark jacket tossed carelessly across one bench, and a two-liter of Coke and a glass sitting on the table. A small dishtowel hanging on the fridge door handle. The tiny counter is cluttered with stuff.

Organized chaos. Exactly what I'd expect from a guy like him.

I look up at him.

He smiles, but it's different somehow. Maybe it's just that weird feeling in my stomach that I totally have no idea why I'm getting.

He seems to notice my anxiety. "Hey," he says, taking a step back. "I'm Bren, not Jack."

"Jack?"

He raises his hands as if to show he's not armed. My camping lanterns swing into the air with them. "The Ripper." Grinning, he lowers his hands and stuffs his keys into his pocket.

I let out a laugh. "Okay." But that weird feeling stays with me. Maybe I'm scared of my own courage. Maybe he wants to get right to it, like he'll offer me a Coke and then make his move. I wonder how I would react to that. Or will react. My stomach is still doing flip-flops, but I'm not sure anymore if I'm feeling excited or threatened.

"We could walk if you'd rather," Bren suddenly says. "It's kind of far, but I understand if you—"

"No, it's fine," I say, cutting him off, and take the stairs up. He wouldn't offer to walk with me if he was actually trying to do something bad. So I don't understand why now, of all times, Ethan's

warnings come flooding back into my head again. Like that stuff he was saying about guys seeing my clothes and thinking maybe no means yes with me.

But Bren wouldn't have to force girls to do anything, I reason with myself. *With those eyes and that smile, he can get any girl he wants.*

Once I'm in the RV, I look to either side. The curtains are all drawn, I notice for the first time. Bren gets in behind me and jerks the door shut roughly.

Why didn't he go around to the front?

That weird feeling flickers to life again. He's behind me, close enough that I can feel the warmth of his body, although he isn't touching me.

He doesn't say anything. Doesn't go to the fridge to offer me something to drink.

Where did he put the stuff he bought earlier? He was coming from a totally different direction. He can't have walked the whole way to the camper and back in that short of a time. Something is off here. A wave of fear washes over me. The sweet scent I smelled back at the visitors' center is suddenly really intense. I'm too scared to turn around and look at him. I open my mouth, not sure whether I want to talk to him or scream or just run to the driver's side door.

At the exact moment that I decide to run, there's a loud crash, and glass splinters fly in every direction. A lantern rolls past my foot. Before I can react, Bren's arm shoots out. He presses my elbows against my body, squeezing me. At first I'm frozen in shock; then I start trying to wrench my arms free, but I can't, he's too strong.

I scream again and again, so loudly that it hurts my throat. "Help!" "No!" "Please!" but then his hand is on my face. He's pressing something soft against my mouth and nose, holding it down tight.

The sweet smell burns my lips, makes my eyes water. Immediately, the room starts to spin. I can't breathe this stuff in. *Don't breathe, don't*. Still holding my breath, I dig my nails into his thigh, but Bren's grip is like iron, like the bars of a cage. Blind panic

fills me. I can't get away. Oh, God, I can't get out of here. I understand what's happening to me and yet I don't.

"Hold still, I'm not going to hurt you." He sounds perfectly calm, even as his arm is winding tighter and tighter around my body.

All I can see now is the white cloth. All I can think about is how I'm going to die. My pulse is throbbing in my ears. The pressure in my chest is unbearable. I have to breathe. Aimlessly, I kick out at him, land a couple of blows, but then he crushes me more tightly against him, lifting me so my feet are dangling in the air. My eyes start to water. My lungs are exploding. I can't hold my breath any longer. The sweet stuff flows into my mouth, scratches my throat. Neon-colored spirals dance before my eyes against a black background. I try to wriggle free, but my muscles have other plans.

"I won't hurt you, don't worry." Bren's voice pierces the thick, dark fog circling inside my head. I feel myself slump in his grip, tip forward. I know that I'm blacking out. And that it means I'm going to die.

Wild patterns envelop me. At the end, all that's left are words.

Hold still, I'm not going to hurt you.

You really are completely useless.

Do you want this?

CHAPTER 3

The first thing I notice when I wake up is the rocking. I'm lying on something, and whatever I'm lying on is swaying back and forth, like on a ship.

I'm not sure why, but I don't want to open my eyes. What's stopping me? Fear? Was I having a nightmare? If so, I can't remember what it was about. I'm not really awake, am I?

Maybe I should just go back to sleep. But I blink a few times anyway, because I'm so disoriented. My eyelids are leaden and sticky; I can barely open them.

More anxiety now. Everything around me is completely dark. I can't see a single thing. Places this dark don't exist, at least not where we're from. There's always light coming from somewhere—streetlamps, moon, stars, whatever.

I blink again, but the darkness stays. Why is it so dark? My pulse twitches hard in my throat.

If I can just find something familiar, that will calm me down. Like my messy nightstand or the flowered curtains. But when I turn my head to one side to get my bearings, a stabbing pain hits behind my eyes. Red flashes flicker at the edges of my vision, and it hurts so bad that for a few seconds I'm afraid I'm going to pass out.

What the hell is wrong with me? I try to do some kind of self-inventory, but the fear is making it hard to think clearly. All I know is that it's crazy hard to catch my breath. My chest is sore, like maybe I

have a lung infection. And I can still hear my pulse hammering in my ears. *Bam. Bam. Bam.* Maybe I have a fever?

"Ethan?" My voice sounds weirdly choked, and my throat is raw, like I've been screaming or crying. I try to remember what happened before I fell asleep, but there's this big, gaping hole where those memories are supposed to be. Nothing. No mental images, no information, nothing but dark fog.

Where am I? Where are my brothers?

Deep in my bones, I sense that something terrible has happened. The feeling gets stronger with every breath I take, permeates my entire being. I'm not sure if I want to know what it is, which may be why I didn't want to open my eyes earlier. Is this the first time I've been awake since it happened?

Cautiously, I feel around underneath me. I'm lying somewhere cool and dry. Now I notice that my fingers are trembling like crazy. Am I cold? Am I in pain anywhere besides my forehead and around my eyes? I try to listen to my body, but I keep coming back to my shaking hands. And my hammering heart. This throbbing sensation everywhere. In my chest, in my throat, in my temples. Even in my wrists. And there's something on my face, on my mouth and nose. That's why I'm having such a hard time breathing.

I want to pull it off, but I can't raise my arms. I let out a whimper. What's wrong with me? Why am I so weak?

I focus on my hands, curl and uncurl my fingers, and then try to lift my forearms.

It works, but my hands immediately hit some hard barrier directly above me.

Oh, God, what is that?

I can't fight back the terror any longer. My heart is racing faster and faster. Bam-bam-bam. As if running on autopilot, I run the tips of my fingers across the surface. It's cool and dry, like the floor. It's big. It's everywhere.

I'm trapped.

I hear myself gasping for breath. No, no, that's impossible, I would remember that. It feels like I can't get enough air to deal with this horror around me. Now I feel that thing on my face again, smell

that sweet, chemical scent. Right against my nose. Is that what's making it so hard to breathe? A cloth of some kind?

I try to bring my hands to my head, but my arms are heavy, so heavy. My fingers flop weakly at my sides, slide along an edge or corner or something.

This is where the ceiling angles down around me, it must be right by my shoulders. I envision myself inside some sort of rectangle. With the last of my strength, I push against the walls at my sides, but they're like granite, they don't budge an inch.

All at once I'm so terrified that my head starts to swim. I hear a horrible sound, like the strangled sob of an abandoned animal, and realize it's coming from my throat.

I'm trapped in a coffin. For a moment, I believe the darkness, decide I must be dead. My pulse accelerates even more, becomes white noise.

No, no, no, I'm still alive, I'm alive.

It's not a coffin. It's a box.

My body is soaked with sweat. The noise gets louder. It reminds me of something. An image, a sensation, something that happened right before I conked out. It's floating around in there somewhere. I have to remember. If I can remember, I'll know where I am, and then maybe I can get myself out. But my head is muzzy with fear and this disgusting sweet stuff.

I take deep breaths through the cloth, trying to push the fear down, but it's not working. My arms and legs are trembling uncontrollably. *Calm down, Lou! Think! Where have you heard this noise before?*

I can hear my blood rushing in my head. That terrible sweetness fills my lungs. It must be in this cloth on my face. Or else it's all around me. Consciousness is slipping away from me like a wet fish I can't keep hold of.

I sense it sliding from my grasp, feel myself sinking back into the darkness. As I start to fade, I catch a fleeting glimpse of something. A sense of being alive. I see treetops swaying back and forth like reeds beneath a blood-red sky. The scent of pine needles and smoke flows through me. It feels like freedom. It swells within me until it's

so real that I can almost grab it—but before I can latch on, the darkness swallows everything.

The next time I come to, the rocking is the first thing I notice again. The rocking and the darkness. Bam. Bam. Bam. I'm still in the box. As soon as I realize that, my heart starts thundering wildly again, sending muted shock waves through me. I can't think at all anymore. It feels like I'm in the belly of a monster, being digested alive. My whole body is shaking. I remember the three-headed monster living behind my dollhouse that I was so afraid of when I was little. Every night, Ethan had to come in and say a magic spell so that it wouldn't come out. But Ethan's not here. I'm alone. Nobody can see that it's swallowed me. In the darkness, the thought becomes more and more real. Even the sound of my own breathing is suddenly strange and frightening. Wheezing, rattling... maybe that isn't me? Weird, nonsensical thoughts are tumbling through my mind. But all at once, I realize that my brain is in perfect working order. The monster thing is just my subconscious playing tricks on me because it thinks the truth will freak me out way more than my childhood fears.

I force myself to breathe evenly. In, out, in, out. Longer out than in, the way Liam taught me to do so that I wouldn't get so anxious about math tests. In. Out. I can breathe a lot more freely than I could earlier.

The cloth is gone.

Did it slip off, or did someone come take it away? Who? New terror builds within me. Twenty feet tall. Massive.

What happened to you, Lou? Think! You have to remember!

Talking to myself seems to help, even if it's only in my head. It's like having someone else there who cares about me, and it also proves that I'm still alive. *Someone's locked you in here, but left you alive. Why didn't they kill you?* My memory is still one giant black hole, as impenetrable as the thing I'm lying in. Darkness inside me, darkness around me.

Remember, Lou!

But I can't find anything to grab onto. And the last question hangs in the air, unfolding into a labyrinth with hallways of terror.

Why didn't they kill you?

I focus on my lower body, trying to figure out if anything down there hurts, but I don't feel anything. All I know is that I absolutely cannot, must not answer that last question, because as soon as I let my imagination step into that labyrinth, I'll get lost in my own fear and I'll never find my way back. Then I'll pass out from panic...

Quit thinking about that, Lou, please! Don't go there! Try to remember...

But I can't...

Why am I in this box? How much oxygen do I have in here? Am I going to suffocate, or will they get me out in time? And what are they going to do with me then? Torture me? Rape me? Images of meat hooks and knives and electric shocks flicker in my head. A man in a mask. Am I going to end up dead in a landfill somewhere?

The thought of my brothers finding me like that—cold, lifeless, contorted—presses the air from my lungs. Ethan's face, the devastation in his eyes, knowing that all his lecturing was for naught... that I didn't listen to him yet again.

A single sob bursts out of me with almost violent force before I can swallow it. I can't stop picturing Ethan's face. He's looking at me there in the darkness, from far away. I want to reach out and cling to him.

I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry...

He looks down at me with a solemn expression in his blue-green eyes, and part of my memory abruptly returns, as though it had been there in his gaze the whole time.

We had a fight, Ethan and I did. He yelled at me because I forgot the camping lanterns at home. I remember shouting that I hated him and then running off, and then being afraid of a long shadow that was moving through the forest.

Right, the shadow. There was something evil there.

Another wave of fear rolls out from the darkness and into me, filling me until there's no space left for rational thought. I'm trapped inside a monster, I'm going to die… *Lou, please…*

I breathe deeply to fight it back, try to conjure up details, but I can't latch onto any of them. They're all in tatters, little shreds of memory fluttering around in my head until panic shoos them away. Ethan, the lanterns... the rustling of the trees... I heard the rustling trees after I fought with Ethan. For some reason I'm positive of that.

To keep myself from losing my mind, I run my hands over the surface above me. Definitely the lid of a box. I feel around for an opening, silently praying that I'll wake up even though I know this isn't a dream.

Eventually, I close my eyes, though that doesn't change anything. It's dark one way or the other. But I tell myself it's better not to actually see the darkness around me. With my eyes closed, I can focus in on my own darkness, on the gaps in my memory. I go back over what I know. Ethan and the lanterns, the shadow... and then Jay was there... and the rustling trees. I felt free, I was laughing. Talking to someone. But who?

That question suddenly looms over the others, circling and echoing in my head. Who? Who was I talking to? Who? If I remember that, I'll know what happened to me afterward.

I went with someone!

The realization hits me out of nowhere. Followed by more panic. I went with someone, and that someone is holding me prisoner, caged up like an animal. Why is everything rocking like this? Are we driving? Is he driving me to some remote place? If so, that means he really does plan to do something horrible. Something he needs to take me far away for, because he doesn't want to be disturbed...

This time, I can't make myself calm down. I wheeze, scream, hammer on the wall above me with my fists. My head explodes with pain, my knuckles are on fire, but I can't stop. I'm going to scream until I pass out. Maybe I just want to know. To know for sure whether I'm going to live or die. I push against the lid with my hands and knees—and then suddenly a hard jolt slams me against the side wall. I lie still, woozy.

Something's changed. My pulse throbs hotly at my temples. I listen into the darkness.

The rocking has stopped.

It feels oppressive, like a response to my outburst.

Icy dread crawls up my spine, though I'm pouring sweat. I don't know which is worse: not knowing what's happened to me, or knowing that I'm about to find out.

CHAPTER 4

Desperately, I try to make out a sound, but all I can hear is my heart, thumping so fast that I can barely breathe. I stare at the lid in a daze, but then the side of my prison swings open, not the top.

The brightness is like a punch in the face. I squinch my eyes shut and roll onto my side, pressing my back against the wall behind me. Even through my closed eyelids, I can still see the shadow that steps in, covering the blinding flood of light. Someone is standing in front of the box, in front of the wall that swung open a moment ago.

Is this when I die?

My teeth are chattering, and I realize that I'm soaking wet. Head to toe.

"Shh, quiet," I hear a man's voice say. "I didn't have a choice."

I know that voice. I'm not sure where, but I don't trust it. My hands clench around the chain of my necklace, practically crushing it. The tiny cross Ethan gave me once bores into my skin. I think I would rather just pass out again, but my body refuses.

"I'm going to get you out now."

I can't make myself keep my eyes shut any longer. I look directly at his face.

Brendan!

He's kneeling on the ground, observing me with his head tilted to one side. For half a beat I don't know what the hell is happening.

Has he come to free me? But no, the look in his dark eyes is too narrow, too searching, too calculating. Too knowing. As I'm lying there, trying to work out what his presence means, the gaps in my memory begin to fill in. I see the *Travel America* signage, his jacket on the bench, the stuff on his counter, his questioning look. I even feel his arm around my torso, the way he's restraining me to keep me in check.

Reflexively, I press myself more tightly against the wall behind me.

He raises a hand like he's trying to soothe a shy deer. "I'm not going to do anything to you, Louisa."

I'm Bren, not Jack.

He's lying. He was lying to you the whole time. He's lying to you now. He's going to kill you.

His arms stretch into the box. To me they look like tentacles, coming to grab me and throttle me. I start screaming. I hear him talking to me, trying to calm me down, and I scream louder to drown him out. I slap his hands away, over and over again.

Cursing, he grabs my upper arm so tightly that I whimper in pain and stop fighting him. He uses the moment as a chance to slide his other hand underneath my hips. "I don't want to hurt you. Stop fighting me." His tone is calm, but determined. He's going to get his way, and he knows it.

I try to kick him, but my legs are like pudding. He heaves me out of the box in one quick motion. My head starts throbbing again; a gyroscope of colors rotates around me. Black, red, white. His hands are still gripping me tightly. I try to get away, but my body ignores my commands, like maybe the nerves connecting my legs to my brain have been severed.

I'm not going to escape him. I'm completely at his mercy.

The moment I understand that, really and truly get it, I gag and spit a wad of bile onto my fingers.

He grips my hair, holding it away from my face, and I can't stop him. He waits. "That's from the chloroform," I hear him say almost casually. "It won't last long, don't worry."

I focus on a point on the ground to make the world stop spinning so fast. It looks like a half-moon, but the spinning is making it fuller and fuller. I retch some more bile onto my hands. My throat is raw, and my lungs are on fire. I wish I were dead. Then I wouldn't be afraid anymore.

After a while passes without me puking again, he clears his throat. "I'm going to put you on the bed now. That's all."

I don't know how he takes hold of me, only that he does.

I flail around again, but I can tell my resistance is futile. I feel myself swinging down and landing on my back, onto something soft. The ceiling overhead is rocking back and forth.

Where is he?

I turn my head to the side and see him at the foot of the bed. I stare between his thighs at a hallway leading to the driver's cab.

I'm still in the RV! That explains the rocking. He's hauled me away somewhere so that he can do whatever he wants with me and then dispose of me afterward.

I clench the material under me as tightly as I can. Of course he's going to say he doesn't want to hurt me. He wants to lull me into a false sense of security. Probably more fun for him that way—first get my hopes up, then watch them shatter when I realize he's killing me. I can almost feel his piercing gaze on my skin, blazing and burning, as he pictures everything he's going to do to me. How he's going to torture me.

Inside, I curl into a ball, try to get away from him. I want to lift my hips and scoot to one side, but whatever he gave me, I'm still numb from it.

"Do you need to use the bathroom?"

I flinch. The question rips me away from my fear immediately, as if the fear had just been a dream. I shake my head, but the next thing I notice is the pressure in my bladder.

"Tell me when you do and I'll help you."

I look up, working my way up his black cargo pants with my eyes. His T-shirt is completely soaked through with sweat. Even though I'm close to passing out again, I can tell that it's unbelievably hot in here. I focus on his face. He's regarding me closely. His pupils

are huge, his eyes wide. They have an unnatural glint in them, the way they did in the parking lot of the visitors' center. I remember that look. He keeps staring and staring, swallowing me with his gaze. It's so much worse than the darkness from earlier.

Why didn't I see what that look really meant when I first met him? That he wants to devour me until there's nothing left of me? How could I have thought those ominous dark shadows beneath his cheekbones were attractive?

"I've put you on the toilet a couple of times. Don't you remember?"

I shake my head again and close my eyes in defeat. I don't dare think about him dragging my unconscious body from the box, undressing it, and setting it on the potty. The fact that I can't remember any of it only makes it worse. Who knows where he touched me, or what he was thinking about.

Still, he's given me one piece of information: if I've used the bathroom twice already, I must have been out for an awfully long time. If I knew how long, I might be able to work out how far we've driven and where we are. But I don't want to have to ask him. I don't want to talk to him at all.

A soft rustling sound makes me open my eyes again. He's standing a little closer to the bed now—he must have taken a step forward. Now he's looking down at me from above. "I'd give you something to drink, but I can't for twenty-four hours after the anesthesia. It would be too dangerous. You might pass out again and then choke on your own vomit."

I roll my head in the other direction so that I don't have to see him. Now I'm facing the back wall of the camper, which the double bed is directly against. There's a wall cupboard near the top, extending maybe a foot and a half over the bed. Everything here is totally cramped.

"Lou, I know you're probably scared, but I'm not going to hurt you. I promise."

He chloroformed me and stuck me in a goddamn box. Does he have any idea how grotesque he sounds right now? My upper arm is still burning where he grabbed me and dragged me out. I don't

know what his definition of "hurt" is, but it seems to be quite a bit different from mine. Maybe he doesn't think it will hurt me when he chokes me, squeezes my breasts and forces himself on me.

I press my fist against my mouth to suppress a whimper. I taste my own sour bile on my fingers, but I don't care.

Behind me, I hear him sigh. "Okay, I'll leave you be for now. You'll just have to see for yourself that I'm going to keep my word."

Heart pounding, I listen to his footfalls as he walks away. They sound hard and heavy, and the floor creaks under his weight.

"Why me?" I whisper into the fist at my lips.

The creaking stops. Everything is still for a while. A bird twitters outside.

"Because you're so full of life," he says quietly.

My throat closes up, but I'm so horrified that I can't even cry.

I nod off, wake up, nod off again. Every time I come to, I'm terrified that Brendan will suddenly show up and attack me. He's actually there two or three times, standing there at the foot of the bed with his dark gaze fixed on me... but this time when I wake up, I don't see him.

I'm lying on my side with my cheek mashed against the bedsheet, sticky with drool. I'm drenched in sweat from head to toe. Something is different, though. I lie there for a moment and realize that I feel better, less exhausted... more *full of life*. That phrase has been echoing in my head since the moment he first said it. I think I even dreamed about it. I can't figure out what the hell he meant by it. Did he kidnap me because he'd rather see me dead? Am I *too* full of life for him?

I tell myself to stop thinking about that. Too terrifying.

I lie completely still for a while, letting my head clear. What is he planning on doing with me? Where are we? Can I get away from here somehow? Hundreds and hundreds of questions, but I push them aside, focus on my own body.

I turn my head from side to side a couple of times. My head is still pounding, but not quite as badly. Tentatively, I wiggle my toes

and rotate my ankles, and then manage to lift my knees and roll onto my back. After another minute or two, I somehow muster the strength to pull myself into a sitting position and scoot against the back wall.

I rub my swollen eyes a little and then look down at myself. I'm still wearing my shorts and my white blouse; even the chain is still there. It's weird seeing myself in these clothes. It seems like weeks have passed since I put them on this morning.

I pluck at the blouse, which is so soaked that it's clinging to my skin—which means it's totally see-through, but I'm too exhausted to care. I smell absolutely rancid. Sweat, puke, terror.

Here in the rear of the camper, there's just the double bed, with barely enough space for a person to stand in front of the tall, narrow wardrobes built into the back wall. There's another wall-mounted cupboard directly above me, high enough that I won't hit my head on it. When I look straight ahead, I can see into the hallway, which is about thirty feet long and leads to the cab with the two front seats. I still don't see Brendan, which is a tiny bit comforting.

A wave of bitterness washes over me. God, he lured me in here so easily with his pretend-vulnerability, with those dark eyes of his. He won the minute he spoke to me. Did he know I'd walk straight into his trap? Could he tell how naive I was just by looking at me? If so, he's amazingly good at reading people, which doesn't make anything about my situation easier.

I scoot forward a bit to examine my surroundings more closely. There are metal plates on the walls at different heights, each one with a grip bar on it, a little like the narrow handles on our kitchen cupboards. And there's a window on either side. I'd been too focused on myself to notice them. Silver blinds block the view outside, but I have to know what it looks like out there, wherever we are. Maybe Brendan's taken me to a different campground, and I can escape and get help.

Don't be an idiot, I scold myself sharply. *If you really believe that, you're completely underestimating this guy.*

I scoot forward an inch at a time and then cautiously let my legs drop over the edge of the bed. Brendan might be lurking outside

somewhere, so I don't dare raise the blinds with the cord and risk drawing his attention, but I slide my fingers in between two slats and bend them apart a crack.

The first thing I see is a metal bar running left-to-right across the window. I saw them on a few RVs in Sequoia National Park. It's designed to protect against break-ins, but obviously it's also preventing me from crawling through the window and escaping. Brendan really did think of everything. I try to ignore the dull ache in the pit of my stomach.

On the other side of the bar, I see a cluster of pale birch trunks, and then nothing but dark pines. The trees aren't nearly as massive as the ones at Sequoia, so we're obviously in a different forest. I tilt my head to look from a different angle. The trees are standing in rows, thick as prison bars. A thin cone of sunlight is shining from behind their tops, creating elongated shadows on the needle-strewn forest floor. I try to guess the time based on their length, but I'm not sure if it's early or late.

I clamber across to the other side of the bed, but there's a bar across this window, too, and the view is the same: trees, trees, trees. No people. No tents. No other campers.

On the other side of the blinds, I spot the window handle. I could pull the window open. Then the screen would be the only barrier between me and the outside. I listen toward the hallway. Everything's silent. I don't know what Brendan would do if he caught me opening the window. My stomach knots up. Just thinking about that, I'm not sure I have the courage anymore. With trembling fingers, I reach in past the blinds, fold the handle down as silently as I can, and ease the window open a crack.

My heart starts pounding in hopeful anticipation. A distant conversation or the sound of children laughing would be enough. Then at least I would know that there are other people nearby. Besides Brendan, I mean.

But no matter how quietly I breathe, I can't hear anything. Apart from chirping birds and the soft rustling of leaves in the underbrush, everything's quiet. Too quiet. Like we're at the end of the world. No cars, no humming machines, just... forest. Is this where Brendan's

going to bury me? Somewhere nobody will ever find me? Is he already out there digging my grave?

I press my hand against my mouth like I'm physically holding the horror back, keeping myself from giving voice to it, as though not letting it out will make it go away. It's in every part of me, though. And the longer I sit here at the window thinking about my grave, the worse it gets. And the worse the pressure on my bladder gets, too. I can't sit around here any longer.

I scoot to the foot of the bed, facing the narrow hallway. A wave of dizziness hits me as soon as I stand up. The walls feel like they're coming at me, and I have to put one hand against the wall on either side to keep from falling over. There's no way I can escape in this condition. Brendan would find me right away. I don't even want to think about what he'd do to me then. Maybe I can lock myself in the bathroom? Then at least I could pee.

I wait for a few seconds. Stare at my bare feet. The half-moon-shaped spot on the floor I was focusing on hours ago is near my left heel, which means that horrible box must be right underneath the bed.

I try to picture him sticking me in there and then driving away like it's no big deal. Driving on and on, bringing me further and further away from my brothers, one mile at a time. My throat closes up. Probably better to not think about my brothers. It makes everything a million times worse.

Cautiously, I put one foot in front of the other. I feel like some kind of junkie staggering toward her next fix. I'm certainly shaking like one. There are doors to either side of me. Up ahead is the table and the kitchen unit. I shove the right-hand door open and discover a tiny shower and one small shelf, but that's it. The room behind the left-hand door is maybe ten square feet, barely enough space for a toilet and a sink. It smells wretched in here, like an outhouse. A handful of fat, black flies are circling beneath the bottom-hung window near the ceiling.

I half-swing, half-flop from the doorframe to the sink, and then from the sink to the toilet. I drop down onto it and take a few deep breaths, and then stand up exactly as far as I have to in order to

push the door shut. There's no lock. I sit there for a minute listening for noises on the other side, but everything's still silent, so I tear my shorts down my hips with one hand while clutching the toilet lid with the other for support. I can't at first, I'm too tense, terrified that Brendan will fling the door open, like maybe he's been lurking nearby, waiting for this exact moment. But he doesn't, and eventually my bladder relaxes.

Once I'm dressed again, I turn the sink on and run water over my hands and forearms. It's fresh and cool, and I wish I could drink it, but it smells like it's about half chlorine, which is just as gross as chloroform. I pick up the pale blue soap on the edge of the sink and use it to wash my face and hands. Immediately, the smell of sea salt and lavender fills the tiny room, and suddenly it's like I'm back in our bathroom in Ash Springs. I turn the soap over and over in my hand, lathering it up, anxiously rubbing one hand across my cheeks again and again, feeling the soft suds melting against my skin, still clutching the bar in the other hand. I don't want the scent to go away. I want to smell more of it, as much of it as I can. I want to draw it into me. I keep rubbing my face more and more frantically. I can't stop. It's like I've snapped. I glop the suds onto my arms, my neck, my hair, until I'm completely covered in white crowns of foam.

The scent reminds me of home. The realization hits me like a bolt of lightning. It's the first rational thought I've had in here. My brothers and I use this same soap. Wild Ocean Dream, some discount store brand. *Now we can dream wildly about the ocean here in the desert.* Avery laughed as he said it. Liam rolled his eyes.

I hear myself gasping for air.

At that moment, the door jerks open.

Brendan stares at me with narrowed eyes.

From one second to the next, I turn to ice.

"What are you doing there?" His voice is tight.

I must look strange covered in soap suds, with only my eyes peeking out from behind a cloud of lather.

Brendan extends a hand very slowly, like *I'm* the psychotic one here. "Give me the soap, Lou," he says. From his tone of voice, you'd think it was a butcher knife.

"Don't call me Lou," I whisper in a strangled voice. "You don't know me."

"Of course I do. Give me the soap, Louisa."

"No!" I press the wet chunk of baby blue soap to my chest like it's a piece of my heart he's trying to take away.

"I told you to call me when you wanted to use the toilet." He sounds accusatory, but there's not much heat in it. "Did you drink any water?"

I press my lips together tightly and shake my head.

"Good. Wash that off."

"No!" I want to keep the smell. I don't want him taking it.

He gives me an appraising once-over, like maybe he's trying to decide whether he should let me win this round. Finally he shrugs in indifference. "Okay, then stay that way." He nods toward the bed. "Come on back. I suppose you're done using the toilet, right?"

I don't move. I stand there clutching the soap. It's totally dumb, but I can't help it.

"We need to get going." He moves in to take my arm, but I jerk away, and then slip on the wet floor and land butt-first on the toilet.

"Going where?" I manage.

His smile is sickeningly triumphant. It makes me want to punch him in the face. "Further. Further away from where I picked you up."

Picked me up. Like I was hitchhiking or something.

My grip on the soap relaxes as he speaks, and he plucks it gingerly from my fingers and places it on the top shelf where I can't get at it. Then he grabs my arm with such determination that I don't dare resist.

He stops near the foot of the bed, and a horrific suspicion comes over me. My toes cramp against the floor. "Are you going to lock me in the box again?" It comes out as a whisper.

He gazes down at me, and for a second it's almost like I can see the horror I felt in that black hole written on his face—as though he'd already been in the belly of that beast, not knowing whether he was dead or alive. The expression in his eyes gives me chills way more than that all-devouring look he normally has.

After what seems like a million years, he shakes his head, slowly and mechanically, as though bringing himself back from somewhere else. "This road will be empty enough that I can let you stay out here. I only needed the box in the beginning." He lets go of my arm; I can't shake the feeling that he was hanging onto me for support. Which is obviously totally ridiculous.

I rub the spot he was clutching as inconspicuously as I can, and feel the blood shoot from my arm into the tips of my fingers.

Brendan's at the window now, which is at stomach height for him. He pushes two of the slats apart on the blinds, the way I did before, and then leans over and peers outside.

Then, in a terrifyingly soft voice, he says, "Unless, of course, you try to run away from me."

CHAPTER 5

I know what those metal plates with the grip bars are for now. Brendan's chained me to them so that I don't do anything stupid while he's driving—that's how he phrased it, anyway. He's put one pair of handcuffs at each end of a thin iron chain. One pair's attached to the bar; the other's for me. He's only cuffed my right wrist, though, and the chain is long enough that I can lie on the bed while we drive. The blinds are still shut, and he's expressly forbidden me from opening them. Though that would be pointless, since the windows are tinted so dark that nobody would be able to see me outside anyway.

As soon as the camper started moving, I got super dizzy again, but fortunately I nodded off two or three more times. By this point, I've lost all sense of time. I can't see out the front windshield, because there's a folding door between the sleeping area and the hallway, and Brendan has it shut. What little light comes in through the blinds is twilight grey, so I'm guessing it's late afternoon.

Thinking about nighttime makes icy dread spread through me. In horror movies everything terrible happens at night. It's like the darkness somehow brings out the evil—the wild, untamed, uncontrollable, irrational side that people manage to keep under wraps during the day. That's how Jayden explained it to me once months ago, when he was researching it for whatever reason. Maybe Brendan's some kind of Jekyll-and-Hyde character.

He said he knew me, and I can't figure out where from. I bet I would understand him better if I did.

I lean back against the rear wall of the RV and thump the back of my head against it in a monotone rhythm like I'm trying to shake the memory loose, but I just can't come up with how we might be connected. I briefly wonder whether he's a friend of one of my brothers', but I doubt it—I'm pretty sure I know all their friends. Besides, I would have noticed Brendan, the way I noticed him immediately at the visitors' center.

How can he know me when I don't know him? Or was he saying that to confuse me? I don't think I was just a random victim. If I were, he'd have answered my question differently. Although he might have been lying. Maybe he lies all the time. Maybe he's preying on my fears.

That dull throbbing pain in my eye sockets flares again, and I quit hitting my head on the wall. I press the tips of my fingers against my eyelids, and then wipe my sticky fingers on my thighs. The soap lather is dry now, leaving a slimy feeling on my skin. I pat my hair. It's stiff and dry like straw at the ends, but it smells like Ash Springs and my brothers.

My hand drifts to my long necklace almost automatically, and I look down at the collection of pendants hanging from the thick silver ring at the end. Each one is special in its own way. I shouldn't do this, but I also can't stop myself. If I don't keep busy somehow, I'll lose my mind.

I lift the silver cross Ethan gave me for my sixteenth birthday. *So you never lose your faith, no matter what happens,* he said. A big, hard lump starts to form in my stomach. I wait for the tears to form in my eyes, but they don't. I'm too tense to cry.

My fingers tremble as I pluck the pink heart out from the bunch—another sweet-sixteen gift, this one from Avery. *A heart for our family's heart*, the card said. I was surprised, because I'd always thought that if anyone was the heart of the family, it was Ethan. He'd always been the one who kept us all together, especially after Dad died. Apparently, Avery doesn't see it that way.

I give the heart a tight squeeze and then turn my attention to the silver Buddha hand with the all-seeing eye. Liam's Christmas present to me. Maybe his last. The hand has a Buddhist saying engraved on it. The letters are so tiny that I can't make them out now, but I know what they say. It's the same saying he has tattooed on his back: *It is better to travel well than to arrive.*

Oh, Liam… I think about that dumb invisible rhino. I remember how miserable I was when he suddenly took off for India, how I cried myself to sleep at night. He was eighteen then, and I was twelve. I thought he didn't love me anymore. At least not enough to stay with me. And I remember how Ethan and Avery tried to cheer me up. Ethan tried to play the rhinoceros game with me even though I was way too old for it by then, and Avery made me gigantic portions of all my favorite foods every day, pasta with tomato sauce and fish sticks with mashed potatoes and ketchup. And they let me eat myself sick on peanut butter, lemon cookies, and chocolate donuts.

I stroke the cold metal hand before letting it slide back to the others, and then pick out the round turquoise charm with pink polka dots. This one's from Jayden*. A little sister,* it says on the front. On the back: *is more than a forever friend, she is joy to the heart and love without end.*

I let go of the round charm and press my hand to my mouth. My throat hurts, because that's where all the tears are stuck, but they just won't come out. My eyes are even burning, hot and salty, but they're dry.

If only I hadn't gone with Brendan and gotten into his camper. If only I hadn't tried to make him like me. If only I'd asked Jay to wait. If only I hadn't forgotten the camping lanterns at home. If only I'd been better in school, and hadn't dyed the potatoes blue...

You never mean to do anything, I hear Ethan saying mournfully. *And you're always sorry afterward.*

Maybe they think I ran away. They're probably driving back home right now to look for me. Back to Ash Springs.

I lie down on my side and draw my legs in, wrapping my arms around them. Then I press my face against my knees, so hard that it

hurts. But I need the pain.

I hear Brendan's footsteps in the hall. Fortunately, he's not trying to sneak, so I have time to retreat to the head of the bed, to the rearmost part of the RV. He folds the door open like a harmonica and stops, standing there between the two walls.

"You didn't turn the light on," he says. "The chain's long enough." He nods to the light switch.

I stare past him, clenching the links of the chain tightly. If I can't stop the inevitable from happening, what good does light do me?

He waits a moment before pushing his way in to one side of the bed. I shift to the other side, but he stops at the window and pulls open the blinds. I can't not look out. It's pitch dark outside, and I can't make out any of our surroundings, but almost directly overhead in the raven-black sky is an oversized, white full moon, shining as pale as a death shroud.

"Brought you a drink." Brendan holds out a small bottle. "Just water for now, it's less likely to make you sick. That's how it was for me, anyway."

"For you?" I blurt out. I ignore the bottle, even though my throat is like sandpaper.

He smiles. His gaze has lost that penetrating edge—he seems as confident and self-controlled as he did in the visitors' center. "I tested the chloroform on myself," he says. "I mean, I was trying to knock you out, not kill you."

He is clearly totally insane.

"Water was always easier to keep down afterward."

"You did it more than once?"

"Four times." He shrugs like it's nothing, and then offers me the water bottle with an emphatic gesture. "Drink!" It's not a request.

"If I don't, are you going to force it down my throat?" I ask through clenched teeth.

He withdraws the bottle. "If it helps keep you alive."

I close my eyes. "So I'm supposed to stay alive?" I'm not actually sure if that's a good or bad thing, because I don't know what he's

got planned for me.

"Of course." He sounds perfectly casual. "What, you thought I would go to all this trouble just to kill you?"

"Maybe you're going to do it later."

"Or maybe never. Now drink!" He hesitates for a moment. "Please," he adds.

I open my eyes in surprise. He looks harmless, as harmless as he did in the parking lot. There's a stale taste in my mouth, and my body is screaming for water. But who knows what he's put in it? Who knows where I'll wake up next? How I'll wake up? Whether I'll wake up?

"You first," I whisper.

That's all I have to say. He shakes the bottle, unscrews the cap, and takes a long swig. I watch him swallow, and then he hands me the water. "No more than half for now."

I suppress the disgust at the thought of drinking from the same bottle as him. The water is cool and tastes clean, not like chlorine. With every swallow, I become more acutely aware of how thirsty I am.

After I've managed a few gulps, Brendan takes the bottle out of my hand. "That's enough. You can have more later." He nods to the door on the right-hand side. "Do you want to shower?"

"No."

"It smells like a puma cage in here."

"Don't care." I definitely do not want to undress with him anywhere nearby. Besides, it's his fault that I stink.

He sighs in resignation. "You're still afraid I'm going to hurt you."

I draw in my knees and hug them again. "Why else would I be here?"

"So that I don't lose you again." When he says it, he looks as innocent as a newborn babe.

"You never had me, what makes you think you can lose me?" I do my best not to let on just how disturbing this conversation is to me.

He shrugs, and the innocent expression turns distant, unapproachable. "You're not all there yet. You're still out of it from

the chloroform. And you're still way too afraid. Your head needs to be clear before we talk about this."

I close my eyes. If he was planning to do something terrible to me, he wouldn't go out of his way to explain everything to me, would he? He could have gone ahead and done it right then and there. Then again, what do I know about how crazy people think? Maybe this is his idea of foreplay.

"Tomorrow you can have some food," I hear him say. Everything's silent for a while. Then the floor creaks like he's stepping in place. He takes a deep breath. I can picture his pupils widening. "I had to do it," he says suddenly. "I didn't have a choice. There was no either-or. Never." Another creaking sound, and then footsteps. "If it's okay with you, I'm going to go take a shower."

I hear the water running. If I can get free now, I'll have a head start. As silently as I can, I slide to the edge of the bed. The metal plate he's handcuffed the other end of my chain to is screwed into the wall in front of me. My gaze shifts outside. I hadn't realized how bright the night is. We're still in the middle of the forest, at least I think we are. Millions of stars cast their silvery light down on the trees, enveloping them in pale fog. For a fraction of a second, I consider pounding on the windows with my fists, but then I realize there's probably no point. It looks like there's not another living soul out there—there's just that milky, shimmering light. It's like we're on an undiscovered moon that happens to have a patch of forest on it. If I start making noise now, Brendan will jump out of the shower, and my shot at escape will be over before it begins.

I try to force my hand through the metal ring of the handcuff, but it's so tight, it's like Brendan measured my wrists. The thought that he might have actually done that makes me nauseous. I tug at the ring, make my hand narrow, but I can't even begin to wedge it past my thumb joint. After a few minutes, my skin is lobster red, and the back of my hand is bleeding. Tears of pain and frustration spring to my eyes. I don't have much time—Brendan's not going to stay in the shower forever. In a fit of desperation, I brace my feet against

the wall and pull like crazy on the grip bar on that metal plate, until my heart is hammering wildly and I'm nearly sick from overexertion. I have to get out of here. Now.

I pray, I curse, I jerk, but the metal plate doesn't give. Not an inch. It's screwed tightly into the wall with four screws, and each of the screws is apparently stronger than I am.

I start pulling again, but then I hear the water turn off. Abruptly, I release the bar, just as the door swings open and Brendan appears, wearing only a towel slung across his hips.

"The whole camper's rocking. What are you doing?"

My pulse is racing; sweat is running down my face. "Nothing," I whisper, hiding my hand behind my back.

He comes toward me, around the bed, brows knitted darkly. "Forget it. Not even I can tear the plates out."

I stay sitting there stiffly; he stands directly in front of me, so close that his legs are almost touching my knees. "Did you try that too?"

"Of course. I think you'd need a cordless screwdriver and a ton of patience to get those things down." That triumphant gleam returns to his eyes. "And the handcuffs, forget it. Double-lock. The trick with the needle or the paper clip won't work." He gestures with his chin toward my necklace. "Or with one of those things."

I bite my lip and lower my eyes. The thought had occurred to me, it's true.

"You're not going to escape me, Lou. With or without the cuffs, you're not going anywhere. Get used to it."

"Louisa, my name is *Louisa*," I spit back, keeping my eyes focused on the black towel covering his hips so I won't have to look at his torso. I don't want to see how perfect he is. How can pure evil be so flawless? It makes everything even more confusing. I don't want to remember how attractive I thought he was at first, with those strikingly dark eyes of his, that infinitely penetrating gaze. The question gleaming and flickering in his eyes like a falling star: *Do you want this?*

Do you want me to kidnap you? Do you want me to lock you in a box? Do you want me to rape and murder you?

And, oh my God, he saw the goo-goo eyes I was making at him, saw the way I got tongue-tied just looking at him. He knew I would like him. Another wave of nausea washes over me at the realization.

He turns away. "You'll want to dress warm," he says. "It gets colder here than it does in Sequoia."

Here? Where is "here"? Are we all alone "here"? Isn't he afraid I'll start banging on the windows to get someone's attention? I should have tried that earlier instead of wasting time pulling on his DIY prison construction like a lunatic. Then again, if there really had been anyone within shouting distance, Brendan would probably have bound and gagged me before he showered... or put me back in the box. The thought makes me sick all over again.

I scoot back onto the bed. My limbs are heavy, as if I had the flu. I still don't know how long he's had me in here, but I'm guessing I was in the box for at least a day. Judging by how I feel now, I must have been unconscious for quite a while. When I had to get my appendix out when I was eight, I recovered from the anesthesia pretty quickly. Now, I feel like he didn't just kidnap me with the RV, he ran me over with it.

I can't sleep. Brendan is outside now, enshrouded in his hoodie. He's made a fire, and he's sitting on a rock near the flames, staring into them like he's reading the future. For a few horrible minutes, I wonder if he kidnapped me so he can sacrifice me, like maybe he's bringing me to an altar somewhere so he can slit my throat. Maybe he's one of those super crazy types with voices in his head telling him to do stuff. Or maybe he just does a ton of drugs. There are too many maybes here, not enough definites.

I wrap the blanket around my body more tightly, and then lean forward to rest my cheek against the window, to feel the coolness of the pane as though it might somehow comfort me.

Does he see me watching him? Probably not, the windows are tinted, and I still have the lights off.

He smokes a cigarette, then stands up and disappears from view. The floor rumbles underneath me—he must be doing something

underneath the camper. A moment later, he reappears and sits back down on the rock. I squint my eyes. He's got something in his lap. A notepad? And it looks like he's writing. I blink a few times, but it's too dark to make out any details.

I scoot to the back of the bed and curl into a ball, staring out at the hallway. I want to know when Brendan comes back in. I wait and wait for what feels like hours. Suddenly I hear a muted thump, almost like the sound of a trunk lid slamming, and then the side door opens and Brendan comes up the stairs.

Through half-open eyes, I watch him take off the hoodie. He stands there for a moment, perfectly still. His bare back gleams unnaturally pale in the moonlight streaming in through the window. Each individual muscle is visible beneath his skin as though in sharp relief, and seems to come alive with every breath he takes. It's spooky, almost animalistic. Same with the dark tattoo winding across his right shoulder blade. From here, it looks like an evil dragon or a writhing snake. I can't help picturing some vicious monster breaking out of his back as he rapes me. Underneath the blanket, I clench my fists and pray he doesn't get into bed with me.

He starts walking in my direction. I squeeze my eyes shut. But nothing happens. I hear him turn on the water and brush his teeth. My fingernails dig into my palms. He's going on with his life like everything is perfectly normal, and it's fraying my nerves. When I hear his footsteps moving away, I exhale in relief and open my eyes a tiny bit. He removes his cargo pants and slips on a pair of sweats and a light-colored T-shirt. Then he hoists himself into the loft bed above the driver's cab and lies down.

I keep listening. Eventually, after what seems like *so* long, I hear him breathing evenly.

Bit by bit, I realize what that means. For tonight, I'm safe. He's not going to do anything to me tonight. I almost start crying in relief. I'm so desperate for a break, for a couple of hours of not being terrified. I can finally allow myself to sleep.

Tomorrow, I think as I give myself over to the exhaustion, to the darkness settling over me like a sheet. *Tomorrow I have to try and get away, no matter how. Tomorrow I'll be stronger.*

But before my eyes fall shut, I remember his voice, so dangerously and terrifyingly soft.

Unless, of course, you try and run away from me.

CHAPTER 6

Still groggy, I roll over from my right side to my left.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee hits me, along with the hearty scent of eggs and bacon. Avery must be cooking. Avery's the only one who can get bacon just right, so that it's crisp but not charred. When Ethan makes scrambled eggs, they always come out half burnt. I'd like to doze a little longer, but if I don't get up, Jayden will snag the crispiest strips of bacon, and that would be a bad start to the weekend. Anyway, I'm sort of looking forward to having breakfast with everyone this morning, even if Ethan trots out another big to-do list for Saturday: fixing rotten wood slats, shopping, watering the garden, laundry, cleaning the kitchen...

I blink sleepily and straighten up.

I'm not at home. The realization is like a punch in the gut, jolting me wide awake. I hear dishes clattering near the front of the RV, but I can't see what's going on, because the folding door's only partway open.

I slide to the edge of the bed and discover that Brendan's unchained me—or at least he's removed the long iron chain. I still have the handcuffs. They're just like the ones in the movies. One cuff is on my left wrist now; the other is dangling uselessly. It's probably there so Brendan can chain me up quickly anywhere, anytime. Great.

There's a thick, white bandage around my right wrist.

When did Brendan put that on? The fact that I didn't notice is frightening. I look down at the gauze, spread my fingers a few times to shake off the numbness, and then peer past the folding door.

Brendan's in front of the stove in the hallway, shaking a pan. The smells of scrambled eggs, bacon, and coffee were the only real parts of my dream.

I slide to my feet, propping myself against the bed for support as I stand up.

"Oh, you're awake!"

I flinch. He sounds so perfectly normal, like we're a young couple on our honeymoon or something.

"Breakfast will be ready in a minute."

"I have to pee."

Brendan points to the bathroom door with his spoon. "You don't have to ask permission."

I slip into the bathroom. Walking is a lot easier than yesterday, and the throbbing pain in my head is barely an echo of what it was.

I use that disgusting-smelling toilet and then wash my hands and face—without soap, since it's still sitting out of reach. The dangling handcuff clinks against the edge of the sink with every movement, plus the bandage gets wet and the wound underneath starts to burn. I don't unwrap it, though, because otherwise Brendan might insist on putting a new one on me, and I definitely do not want him touching me.

I shut off the water and then impulsively fling open the mirrored cabinet, searching for something I can use to defend myself against Brendan. The results are pretty disappointing, unless I can somehow choke him out with a gauze bandage or smother him with a washcloth. As silently as I can, I flip the toilet lid closed and climb up to check if there's anything on the top shelf... but it's as empty as it looked from underneath. No nail clippers, no files. I briefly toy with the thought of retrieving the soap, but then Brendan would know that I searched the cabinet.

Resigned, I clamber down from the toilet lid and shut the cabinet. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and barely recognize myself. I look like the kind of person you'd see on the

street and then cross to the other side. My face is as pale as winter, with rings under my eyes like blue-black war paint. The paleness makes my eyes seem oversized, like a manga girl's, but without the gleam. They're like blue-green glacier ice, as if my unshed tears have diluted the color.

I stare at my own reflection for a while, until finally I realize that I'm just stalling for time, not wanting to go out to Brendan. I can't stay in here forever, though.

You can do this, I tell myself silently. *With or without a weapon. You're not chained up anymore, so maybe you can even get away today. Back to Ash Springs.*

Talking to myself still helps.

I open the door, but as soon as I see Brendan, my courage evaporates, and I feel like my own shadow. A pale little winter shadow, deprived of light until the darkness finally smothers it. Brendan's so big, so much stronger than me. And I'm afraid he's probably smarter than I am, too.

"Sit!" He gestures to one of the short two-person benches. It's across from the side door, but the side door is shut. Of course.

Mechanically, I slide in and take a seat on a bench. The sight of breakfast makes me ill. There's a stack of chocolate donuts beside a platter of scrambled eggs and bacon. Next to that are some lemon cookies and a jar of peanut butter.

"Coffee?" Brendan holds out a mug. I feel like slapping it out of his hand, but I don't want to make him mad, so I take it. "Black with two spoons of sugar," he adds.

Which is how I always drink it. Which he knows.

He sits down across from me. To hide my confusion, I sip my coffee, and promptly burn my tongue.

"I didn't know what you'd be hungry for, so I just made everything." He leans back slightly, radiating total self-confidence. He's got his hair back in a little ponytail, which brings out his eyes and makes him look older. God, maybe he's actually Avery's age. That would make him ten years older than me. Maybe he's a total pervert who only likes young girls, even though he could have any woman he wanted. "You want some eggs? Lemon cookies?"

I nod robotically, accepting whatever he offers. All I care about is him leaving me alone. I stare at the eggs as he piles them on my plate. They're fluffy and golden, exactly the way I like them.

"Make sure to eat slowly and chew every bite, or you won't be able to keep it down. And maybe no peanut butter yet, now that I think about it." He pushes the jar away slightly with the back of his hand. I notice his braided black leather armband with a silver coin dangling from it, the size of a hazelnut. It's got an image engraved on it—birds in flight, maybe? I didn't quite get a good look at it.

I look back at my plate. Brendan doesn't say anything. He's probably watching me. Nervously, I knead my fingers.

I think he's waiting for me to start eating, so I do, even though I feel totally sick. *One bite at a time*, I tell myself. *Whatever you do, don't get him mad. He's a complete psychopath who chloroformed himself to see what it felt like.*

The fork shakes in my hand. The first bite of scrambled egg falls off three times in a row. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice that Brendan is suddenly intensely interested in a chocolate donut. He's peering at the bottom of it, like maybe checking it for mold.

I pause for a moment. If I want to get away, I need to calm down. I need to watch him, wait for him to make a mistake. He can't possibly have everything under control all the time. Sooner or later, something will go wrong. *And then you smash him in the balls and run away as fast as you can*, I hear Jay say.

I put the fork aside without having actually eaten anything. "How do you know what I like?" It comes out sounding more confrontational than I feel.

"Don't you know?" He blinks in surprise.

"No."

"Think about it, then!" He sets the chocolate donut back down on his plate and folds his hands on the table.

"Were you spying on me? Sitting in the yard with binoculars watching us through the window?"

"Nope. But I still know." He smiles, seemingly enjoying my uncertainty. It almost sounds like he's trying to mess with me.

A memory comes back to me, a mental image of him buying fish sticks, iced coffee, and donuts at the visitors' center. All things I like, I thought at the time. But he couldn't possibly have brought them back to the camper; he must have thrown them away somewhere.

Another mental image replaces the first. It makes me even more anxious. "You followed me. When I was walking to the visitors' center, you were tailing me in the woods, parallel to the gravel road."

He gives me a penetrating look. "Possibly."

"You were the shadow," I whisper to myself. It wasn't Jay at all. Jay's "shortcut" probably wasn't even through the forest. "Which was why you knew about me and Ethan fighting about the camping lanterns. You heard. You were listening."

He looks out the window. Nods.

I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek, distracting myself from the fear with pain. "You heard me telling him that I wanted to run away." Suddenly it's all coming together.

"It was convenient, yeah." Brendan looks back at me. His eyes gleam as he smiles. "It could have turned out differently, though. I'd been expecting a long wait, but you were easy to catch."

Picturing him stalking me, waiting for an opportune moment, nearly makes me physically ill. I press my hand against my stomach. "How long... was I unconscious?"

"About five days. But it wasn't only chloroform. That would have been too dangerous."

Five. Days.

I feel like he just pushed me off a cliff. My brothers have been searching for me for *five days*! Knowing how worried they must be makes me ten times more miserable. "What else, then?"

"Atropine, dimenhydrinate, gamma-butyrolactone, barbiturates..."

"What?"

"Belladonna, knockout drops, sleeping pills... the dimenhydrinate was for the nausea. To keep you from puking." He gazes straight into my eyes, like he can sense my rage and wants to nip it in the bud.

"You gave me knockout drops?"

"A small dose. Don't you remember?"

What a stupid question! Bewildered, I shake my head. He's crazier than I thought.

"You woke up a couple of times. I explained everything to you and gave you some water. Not much, just a few sips at a time."

"Why five days?" I can't believe it. This nightmare is getting worse and worse.

"The first part of the trip was dangerous. I couldn't risk anyone searching the RV and finding you. That's the only reason. And I knocked you out so you wouldn't be scared in the box. On the last day, I gave you some more chloroform so I wouldn't give you too much of the other stuff."

I need to get away from him. I think I'm losing my mind. I pull myself to my feet using the back of the bench for support, but then my knees give out and I flop back onto the upholstery.

That's why I've been so weak, that's why I can barely remember anything. Five days!

"There were never any bears on the path, were there?" My voice comes from far away, yet also thunders in my ears. "You preyed on my fears to lure me away. You... you're..." I force myself to swallow the insult, but contempt is probably written all over my face.

Brendan's expression hardens, and he sets his jaw. "Think what you want of me, I'm still keeping you with me."

"But..."

"You're staying with me. Forever. There's nothing you can do about it. Crying isn't going to help you. Crying never helps. Not with me." He averts his eyes when he says that last part.

I wipe my eyes, but the tears keep flowing and flowing and falling on the lemon cookie and the scrambled eggs.

He glances through the window again, which is at table height. "Where I grew up, might makes right, and here, that's me, not you. Sorry." He pushes himself up from the bench and looks down at me. "I know how hard this is for you."

Hard?

"I'll do everything I can to make it more bearable. When you're angry, be angry. When you're sad, be sad. I'm not going to forbid you to have feelings. I can handle them until things get better. If you

think you want to spit on me or whatever, then do it, but don't overdo it. There's only one thing I absolutely forbid you from trying."

Every second I spend listening to him talk is making me more confused and agitated. "What's that?"

"Escaping." That word is my only hope, and he snaps it in such a steely voice that it's like the sound alone is enough to break every bone in my body.

"What would happen then?" I whisper.

Brendan's face stiffens, mask-like, completely lifeless. His hands ball into fists, and it terrifies me so much that I grab the butter knife next to my plate. It's short and dull, but I hold it like a dagger anyway. He doesn't seem to notice, though, or else he doesn't care. He takes a few deep breaths.

"Just don't try," is all he says.

With that, he walks out and slams the door behind him. I'm alone. Alone, unchained, and I still don't dare move.

I'm still sitting at the table, clutching the butter knife, staring at my plate. Brendan is outside, doing something with the camper. I don't know what. I hear thumping and rattling every so often, and then the whole RV rocks for a few seconds, and once or twice I hear water running through the pipes. After a while, it stops. I look through the window. He's leaning against a tree, smoking. He's standing there so perfectly still that, for one strange moment, it's like he melts into the tree. I get a ridiculous urge to set the camper on fire. He wouldn't get far without a vehicle. Then again, he'd probably kill me for it. *Because you're so full of life... I know you...*

I set down the knife and bury my face in my hands. I haven't eaten a thing—all I had was a sip or two of sugary coffee. My escape fantasies are torn full of holes now. Holes I see Brendan rising from and strangling me. With his hands, with a scarf, with the iron chain. I'm afraid he'd probably be a hand-strangler. Which seems like it would be the worst. Why, I don't know.

But if I have to stay with him, I may as well go ahead and kill myself. I know I can't live like this. Where is he even planning on

taking me? He can't keep driving around with me forever, right?

When Brendan returns, he starts clearing the table, not looking at me. "You want to wash up?" he asks casually as he runs water in the sink.

I stare out the window.

"To distract yourself, maybe." He dribbles some dish soap into the water. "When you use the toilet, there's a box of little orange sachets in there, make sure you always throw one in afterward."

"Why?"

"Disinfectant."

Can he tell I'm imagining poisoning him with them? Then I remember the drugs he used on me. They must be around here somewhere. The RV isn't that big.

"Are you going to do the dishes or not?"

"No."

"Probably just as well with the bandage anyway." Brendan shrugs and regards me thoughtfully. Today, he's wearing deep-green cargo pants and a black Jack Wolfskin T-shirt with a pawprint on the right side of the chest. The shirt is faded, which makes Brendan's dark eyes gleam with an unnatural intensity. They creep me out. At times it's almost like he's already seen literally everything. Every facet of life, every detail. Maybe that's why he's so confident.

He turns and switches on the television, which is attached to a kind of telescopic bar on the wall next to his loft bed. Then he picks up the remote and flips through the channels. The millionth reruns of *How I Met Your Mother* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Soaps, more soaps, game shows, documentaries, the usual afternoon stuff: *Hero of the Week*, *Find me* …

He clicks past that last one super-fast, probably hoping I didn't see it.

"You want to watch anything in particular?"

"*Find me*!" Maybe they're reporting on me? I haven't watched it much, but the episodes I saw were all old missing-persons cases with happy endings.

"Besides *Find me*!"

"*Hero of the Week*," I hurriedly reply. It's Avery's favorite show.

Brendan gives me a look of astonishment. "You like that show?"

Don't you know that? is what I'd like to shriek at him, but I'm too scared. I'm scared to do pretty much everything in his presence. Movie kidnapping victims always seem to be defiant and mouthy and great at snappy comebacks. But this is real. I don't want Brendan to hit me or do something else to me. I never thought I would be in a situation where avoiding physical harm became a top priority for me, even to the point that I'd swallow my pride.

Brendan flips back to the show and leaves it on while he washes the dishes. He keeps glancing over at me, and then at the TV, like he's just learned a new fun fact about me and is trying to categorize it.

I try to focus my full attention on the show, to pretend I'm sitting on the couch with Avery and Liam with a bag of tortilla chips clamped between my thighs. And Jay's peeking in every so often, more so he can gather material for his stories than because he's actually interested in who ends up being Hero of the Year.

I feel Brendan's eyes on me again. I stare stubbornly at the screen, trying not to let on how uncomfortable it makes me.

Today's Hero of the Week is a 22-year-old Harvard student named Andrew Franklin. He recognized a homeless man as an old friend of his dead father's, and now he's going to pay the guy's rent for the rest of his life.

The moderator, David O'Dell, was last year's Hero of the Year. On a bone-dry day in August, he saved nine children from the top floor of a burning orphanage. He was our favorite, because he always seemed totally authentic, like being in the spotlight was more embarrassing to him than anything. Even now, as he's interviewing Andrew Franklin, he looks like he'd rather be grilling hot dogs in his modest back yard than standing in front of a camera. Next to him, the much-younger Andrew Franklin looks like a stockbroker. I know Avery and Liam would hate him, Hero of the Week or not, because of the way he's got his hair parted and way-too-gelled.

"Okay, so, tell the nation how you came across Henry Clark," the moderator says.

Andrew smiles in a preening-peacock way. "Well, David—can I call you David?" David nods, but Andrew has already gone on talking. "David, a few weeks ago I saw that picture in the paper, where some teenagers had assaulted a homeless man. Yet another photograph of a subway station and a *literal* whipping boy. I mean, we *all* know those pictures, don't we, David? It's literally *always* the same story. Not that I would describe myself as jaded, but it is what it is. Nobody knew the man, and *something* made me want to look more closely, and I mean *really* closely, David. God knows why. Anyway, I looked at him and I thought, wow, that old man *literally* looks *just* like a good friend of my father's. God rest his soul."

For reasons I can't quite explain, I really hope this Andrew guy doesn't end up the Hero of the Year. Everything about him seems fake, plus he talks like he's fifty. And if he says "David" one more time I'm *literally* going to throw up.

"So I recognize him, but it's been so long that I have no idea what his name is."

"So what did you do?"

Andrew looks straight at the camera, not deigning to glance in David's direction. "I started putting the word out on Facebook and Do You Know? And eventually I managed to find a friend of a friend of a friend—you know, the usual route—who was able to identify him."

"And now you're going to pay Henry Clark's rent for the rest of his life?"

"Absolutely, David. I mean, it's a matter of honor, isn't it? Our fathers were both Marines."

"That is truly heroic."

"Hah!" Brendan snorts behind me. "That Henry Clark guy is probably dying of lung cancer and only has two months to live. This kid's doing it for the attention."

"Do you know him as well as you know me?" I can't stop myself from asking.

"You seriously think he gives a shit about the old man?" Brendan asks, ignoring my question. He saunters from the sink to the bench.

"He wants people to think he's important. He's probably a mediocre student, and he thinks this will help him land a better job."

"Maybe he just wants to help," I protest exactly as loud as I dare.

"If he really wants to help, he should let this lonely old man live with him, if he was actually his father's best friend." Brendan gives me a sharp look before snatching the remote from the counter and switching off the television, even though the show isn't over. "Go on, go to the back room, we're leaving in a minute."

I do what he says without protest, and he follows me.

"Sit on the bed... now scoot to the left." He attaches the loose handcuff to the chain again.

"Where are we headed?" I manage to ask.

"Onward and upward."

"Onward, where? You must have a destination."

"You won't like it, so why do you want to know?" he retorts gruffly.

"Where are you taking me?"

Brendan fixes the blinds so that I can look out the window.

"Away," is all he says before turning and striding out.

I don't have anything to do, apart from maybe go through the charms on my necklace again. There are others on there, like the little red lipstick from Ava, the silver high heels from Madison, the four-leaf clover from Elizabeth and the yellow sun from Emma... but looking at them will only make me more miserable.

Instead, I gaze out through the slats of the blinds at the desolate landscape. We're driving continuously in one direction, on what seems like a real-life Road to Nowhere. Brendan has the folding door shut, blocking my view toward the front, but on either side, I see patches of pine and spruce forest interspersed with endless stretches of scorched-looking grassland. Behind them are strings of grey foothills, one after another, like elephant feet. If I lean right up against the blinds and look up, I can see the radiant blue sky. I start doing some mental math, trying to work out where we might be. If Brendan drives 200 miles a day, we might already be in Canada. Or

in Mexico, if he's driving south. To the east would be... Arkansas? Oklahoma? Kansas? I'm not sure. I'm guessing it's not Mexico, anyway, because the landscape doesn't fit. It *is* still hotter than hell, though. My blouse has practically melded with my torso and my sweat to form a second skin. I've been wearing this thing for six days now. Same with my underwear and my jean shorts. I feel utterly disgusting, but I still don't want to shower. Maybe I can wash in the sink this evening, so I won't have to take everything off at once. Or I'll shower with my clothes on, at least as well as I can. I wonder if Brendan has clothes for me? Maybe he'll just give me some of his. Or nothing at all.

I scoot closer to the window, not wanting to miss any of the few cars going by in the opposite direction. So far there have been five: three compact cars, a truck, and a black station wagon of a make I didn't recognize. They flitted past the window like spirits before I'd fully registered that they were real. Sometimes this still feels like a bad dream I can wake up from. I press my face against the glass, straining to see out, hoping someone else will drive by. I feel invisible, forgotten. Nobody sees me anymore. Except Brendan. And if he has his way, that will never change. I refuse to let that thought take root in my head, because otherwise I'll fall apart completely. One way or another, I have to get away from him.

I spend a while longer waiting for a car, staring down at the cracked, brittle asphalt. Then I scoot back onto the bed. And try not to think about anything, including Ethan, Avery, Liam, or Jayden. It doesn't work, of course. I paint their faces on an imaginary canvas. I can still picture them exactly. Ethan with his stern mouth and his serious eyes. Avery with his soft features and laugh lines. Liam with his long hair and sunburn and that inward, glowing smile of his. Jay with his mussed hair and wise, knowing expression. I'm the only one missing from the picture. I've put them all side by side. Where would I be standing? In the center, no doubt—the heart of the family. I stretch my hands out like I'm trying to touch them, feel my shoulders grow heavy with the weight of missing them. I miss them so much that my throat closes up and my heart is like a lump of lead in my chest. Like I've been scoured from head to toe with longing.

I don’t become aware of my surroundings again until the bed suddenly starts shaking, jostling me from side to side. Immediately, I clamber to the window and peer through the slats. Brendan is driving on a rough forest road with dozens of potholes. A chill runs down my spine.

The dark spruce trees seem to close ranks more and more tightly as we trundle onward, interspersed only with the occasional cluster of birches or aspens. Those are sparse enough to let a tiny bit of sunlight through, but between the spruces it’s as dark as night.

At one point, we pass a turn-off, and I spot a rusty, broken-down tractor-trailer just sitting there on the side of the road. Forgotten, like me. Clearly nobody comes out this way anymore. Maybe people used to do some logging in this area, but now it looks completely abandoned.

Brendan follows the road a while longer, but I couldn’t guess how far we’ve driven. Ten miles? Twenty? It seems like a distance I’d be able to walk if I had to, if I managed to escape. Brendan turned onto this forest road from a street at some point, so that’s how far I’d need to get.

Once Brendan has parked the camper in a small clearing, he comes straight back to me and unlocks the handcuff attached to the chain. As usual, he drops the key into his pants pocket.

“I’m going to go build a fire,” he says. “We can grill out later if you want.”

I nod, mostly so that he’ll be busy and I’ll have time to look around and work out an escape plan.

His eyes start to light up. He must think I’m starting to accept the situation. “If you like, you can come out and help me.”

I look down at myself, shake my head. It’s still hard to talk to him. His presence is like a hammer blow, crushing me effortlessly like dry bread, again and again.

“You could shower,” he suggests.

I nod again.

“But be careful with your wrist.”

Unconsciously, I run my hand across the bandage, which is dry now.

He maneuvers past the bed and opens the door to the narrow wardrobe. “There are clothes in here for you. You’re an XS, right?”

I gape in astonishment at the giant stack of blouses, shirts, pullovers, and pants. I’m all the more stunned because it never once occurred to me to open the wardrobe. Most of the clothes are pink, coral, yellow, and white—my favorite colors. An anxious fluttering sensation starts spreading through me.

Brendan pulls a drawer open. “Socks and underwear are in here. Shoes are over there”—he points to a different cabinet—“and up there is everything else you’ll need.” He gestures to the overhead cabinet, and then gives me a glance that’s almost sheepish. “Shampoo, shower gel... tampons and stuff.”

I must be staring at him like a cyclops. Maybe talking about this is uncomfortable for him. Then again, if you’re fine with drugging someone and putting them in a box for five days, what could possibly make you uncomfortable?

“Okay, I’m gonna go start that fire.” He reaches the folding door, but then stops for a moment. “Towels are in the overhead cupboard.”

I sit there perfectly still, like I’ve been turned to a pillar of salt. Seconds later, he’s back outside, messing around with the camper. The firewood must be stored underneath it in some kind of storage hatch, but I only half-register the thought.

I blink, still staring at the clothes. The fluttery feeling that started in my stomach when I discovered my favorite colors intensifies. No way. My knees are like jelly as I stand up and take the topmost blouse. It’s pastel yellow with lace sleeves, and there are two pull strings in front to adjust the neckline. My heart starts beating faster. Ethan bought me this blouse two years ago.

No. Way.

I toss it onto the bed and take the next shirt from the stack. White with wide sleeves, the one I bought on sale at H&M, the same one I’m wearing now. It practically falls from my fingers. As if in a trance, I lift the next one. It catches on the handcuff, and I have to jerk it free. It’s the coral-colored blouse with the lace trim, the one I had on when Ethan played judge and jury on me for my sins. Under

that is my pink ruffled top. I'm dizzy. I feel like I'm being smothered. One by one, I yank the tops out and throw them onto the bed. I recognize almost all of them.

How did Brendan get my clothes?

Calm down, Lou! Think!

I take several deep, long breaths, the way Liam taught me.

Is this actually *my* stuff?

The white blouse can't be yours—you're wearing yours. He must have bought these things new.

Yeah, that must be right. My hands shake as I pull out one pair of bottoms after the next: my hot pants with the lace waist, also H&M. My dark-blue capri jeans, my 7/8-length pants with the tight cuffs.

The blood pounds in my ears. He must be even more insane than I thought. Completely batshit. Now I realize that the soap in the bathroom wasn't a coincidence, either.

The pants slip from my hands. How does he know what clothes I wear? How long has he been watching me?

Dazed, I open the cabinet with the shoes in it and discover two pair of my pink-flowered sandals. Of course. The ones I was wearing, and the ones he bought. And there are my flip-flops with the stars on them. And my bright-yellow Chucks.

I slam it shut. I'm terrified to open the overhead cabinet. I know what I'm going to find up there: my orange-blossom shower gel and my blonde shampoo. I crawl across the bed toward the hallway. My brain is sparking, every synapse is firing, I think I may black out. All I can think about is running. Now. I can't wait any longer.

CHAPTER 7

I hold my breath as I sneak into the hallway, stopping at the open window above the sink to peek out. Brendan is a safe distance away from the RV, arranging large rocks into a circle. Between him and the RV is a bundle of firewood like you'd find in any grocery store. The seam of dark trees runs along the far side of his fire-pit-in-progress, but he's kept a safe distance to them.

The sound of the rocks scraping against each other as he arranges them is fraying my nerves. I keep picturing him smashing my head in with one of them. Half of me is paralyzed with panic; the other half wants to burst through the door in the living area and start running.

My gaze shifts from Brendan to the side door. It's locked, plus it's on the side facing Brendan, so he'd see me immediately.

It feels like someone is choking me very, very slowly. Dazed, I look back at him. He straightens up, walks over to fetch the bundle of firewood, and then kneels in front of the stone circle. He pauses for a moment to smooth back a strand of dark hair that's come loose from his ponytail. The afternoon shadows of the trees tremble in the summer breeze, making them seem more alive than he does. Every movement he makes is like the minimalist version of itself. Even now, as he lays thick hunks of wood between the stones, creating a barrier between the fire and the moist earth. My brothers used to do that in the yard in Ash Springs, even though the ground there is

practically never damp. They made it into a competition, though, pulling pieces out and rearranging them again and again. Brendan positions each piece perfectly the first time. Once he's got the base down, he piles smaller chunks on top with an expert precision that suggests he's done this hundreds of times already.

I take a deep breath and take a look around the inside of the camper. All the windows have those burglar-proof bars across them, except for the one in the driver's cab.

Maybe I can get out through the driver's side door. It's facing away from the campfire. If it's not locked, I can sneak out, cross the forest road, and disappear into the trees before Brendan notices. I peer through the window by the dining-room table, gauging the distance between me and the spruce trees. Thirty feet, maybe. And Brendan's probably thirty feet from the camper in the other direction. If I can get to the tree line before he realizes I'm gone, I'll have a sixty-foot head start, which should be enough time to hide.

I glance between Brendan and the door a few more times. My legs are like toasted marshmallows, but I still take a step forward, and then another. Now I'm almost up front in the driver's cab.

"Go ahead and pick out what you want to eat later!" Brendan suddenly calls.

I freeze in place, racking my brain feverishly, trying to decide what to do. Then I squat down and crawl back to the sink, handcuffs clinking. Carefully, I straighten up.

"Okay," I call back. Did he hear how shrill my voice sounded?

He glances toward the camper, but not to the open window I'm standing beside. Maybe this is my lucky day, and he can't see anything clearly through the window screen.

"It's all in the fridge. Pick me out something, too!"

"Right." I clench my fists in agitation.

Brendan returns his attention to the wood. If he's planning to start the fire right away, he'll probably be busy for a while. He might even have to go gather tinder.

I can't wait any longer. This time, I crawl up to the driver's cab on all fours, and then wedge my body through the narrow gap between the seats, across the gearshift. I ease myself into the

driver's seat as quietly as I can and glance at the ignition. The keys aren't in it. Of course not. Then again, I wouldn't have any idea how to drive this beast anyway. Ethan's only given me a couple of driving lessons, and that was months ago.

With trembling fingers, I feel around behind me for the door handle without taking my eyes off the passenger-side door, sick with terror. Finally, I find it. How loud will the click be when the door opens? I scoot to the left, preparing to make an immediate run for it if Brendan hears. Thirty feet, I just have to make it thirty feet, and then I can disappear into the underbrush.

I pluck the handle like a guitar string. Nothing happens. I pull again, harder. Still nothing. He's got it locked. Tears spring to my eyes, but then I notice the window crank. It's a crank! Not electric! I can barely believe my luck. With sweaty palms, I roll down the window. If only I knew where Brendan was. Is he still working on the fire, or has he started sneaking around the camper? With every second that ticks by as I crank the window down, I expect him to fling open the side door. Once it's completely open, I listen hard for quick footfalls or suspicious cracking-twig sounds. Birds sing somewhere overhead, and far away, across a horizon I can't see, thunder rumbles. It's only now that I realize how cool and humid the air outside is. If Brendan heard the thunder too, he might change his mind about grilling.

I shift into a squatting position on the seat and grip the top of the window frame with both hands. First I slide one leg outside to straddle the bottom of the frame, and then I pull the other leg around so that I'm sitting side-saddle.

Now!

I drop to the ground, scraping my back against the door as I fall. I grit my teeth to keep myself from screaming in pain.

The muted thump of my feet hitting the ground makes my heart freeze in my chest. It takes me several seconds to jolt myself out of my shock, but then I start sprinting toward the trees in a blind panic. My legs are nightmarishly heavy. The forest seems to be receding in the distance. Stones bore into my bare feet, ripping the skin.

"Louisa!" Brendan shouts behind me. My name, and some other words that I don't hear, don't care about. I just have to get to the forest. To hide. To be invisible to him.

I'm about to reach the tree line when I trip on a rock and go flying. I hear myself wheezing; everything is swimming. At the last second, I manage to break my fall with one hand.

But then I see Brendan. Like a flickering shadow at the edge of my vision, faster than I would have ever thought possible. He's running not from behind, but from the side, his eyes wild and smoldering. Before my mind has even processed what I'm seeing, the full weight of his body hits me.

CHAPTER 8

He flies directly onto me, slamming me to the ground. I can't catch myself, I scrape across the stones. Every bone in my body seems to break. For a second, all I see are stars and a bright light. He's on top of me, screaming random words I can't make sense of, squeezing my arms down hard against my sides, gripping my neck with one hand.

"I said *no escaping*," he growls, yanking my head up. "I said no leaving me! Don't. Leave. Me." He squeezes more tightly with each word.

I try to yank my arms free, try to fight him off, but it's like fighting a steel wall. I can't move a muscle. I want to say something to calm him down, but I can't get a sound out—his weight is pressing the air from my lungs. For several terrifying seconds, I'm sure he's going to snap my neck, but then he abruptly releases it and yanks me to my feet instead.

Through the fog, I'm dimly aware that he's dragging me back to the camper. I kick his shins, scratch him wherever I can manage to make contact, ram an elbow between his legs, gasping and screaming, but his grip only tightens.

When we reach the side door, he stops, wraps his arms mercilessly around me from behind: my back against his torso, his arms crossed around my chest. His breaths are like slaps against the

back of my neck. I hear him gasping for air now, though I'm completely still myself.

"Goddammit, Lou, do you want to get yourself killed?" he whispers, which is infinitely more terrifying.

For several seconds, he stays there completely motionless, almost like he doesn't trust himself. Like he has to stop himself from hurting me.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." The words come bubbling out of me like water from a spring. "I got scared... the clothes... I'm so sorry... please..."

He's saying something over and over again, so softly that I can't hear it. It sounds like the murmuring of a priest. He's still squeezing me the way he did when he first chloroformed me. He keeps on talking, getting gradually louder, until finally I can hear him.

"I have to keep you safe. I have to..." Abruptly, he breaks off and lifts me to carry me up the steps inside. I don't even fight him anymore—I'm too scared he'll flip out completely. His grip on my forearms is so tight that I'm whimpering behind closed lips. When we get to the hallway, he stops again and lets out a dreadful sigh. "You have to get away... away from me..."

He yanks me toward an overhead cabinet, flings it open, and starts rummaging around frantically inside. Several pieces of paper sail to the floor. Suddenly, he stops short and makes a relieved noise. He withdraws another iron chain, then attaches handcuffs at each end.

"I was scared, Brendan." I have to try again. My heart is racing. He's only holding me by the arm now. He seems almost absent, like his mind is somewhere else entirely.

Without a word, he pulls me back outside and takes a quick glance around. "Safe," he murmurs and leads me around the side of the camper. "Stop... okay, on the ground." He presses my shoulders firmly, and I sink to my knees beside the RV.

"Bren..." I can't make myself meet his eyes, so I stare at the pockets of his cargo pants.

"You shouldn't have run..." He bends down, takes the wrist with the handcuff on it, and attaches the loose cuff to the underside of

the vehicle.

"Brendan..."

"Too late!" he snaps in a choked voice tinged with horror. "Getting dark... it's getting dark..."

Now I'm positive he's going to kill me. Tears stream down my face. I don't want to die. I cross my other arm over my head protectively, hunching over to make myself as small as possible, and squeeze my eyes shut. I hear my own rapid breathing. Thunder nearby. Footfalls, moving away from me. A clinking sound somewhere to my left.

I open my eyes again, blinking, and wipe them on my blouse to clear my vision. Cautiously, I turn to look in the direction of the clinking noise, and discover Brendan about twenty feet away.

He's got that chain wrapped around the trunk of a spruce tree.

Now I see that he's completely soaked with sweat. His pants, his shirt, his hair. His face is ashen.

I scoot closer to the camper without taking my eyes off Brendan. He picks up the handcuffs at each end of the chain and clicks one onto each of his wrists. The chain is still encircling the tree behind him, so he's trapped. A brief smile appears on his face, and for a moment he looks like the Brendan I saw in the visitors' center, the one I was so fascinated by.

"Louisa." His voice cracks on the last syllable. Rivulets of sweat run down his face. "Whatever happens, don't be scared, nothing bad can happen to you." He tugs on the handcuffs. "See?"

"Yeah," I wheeze, high and helpless. What can possibly be so bad that he's got *himself* in chains?

"Everything's dark." He starts moving toward me, but then the chain digs into the tree trunk, jerking him back.

"No, it isn't." My whole body is shivering. "There's a thunderstorm coming, that's all."

"Lou."

This time I'm weirdly happy to hear him call me by my nickname.

He's staring in my direction, but blindly, like he's not really looking at me. "Lou... Promise me something."

"O-okay," I stammer.

"But first, take this." He holds up a tiny key. He's shaking so hard that he can barely keep a grip on it. "You have to take it."

"How?"

Brendan leans in as close as the chain will allow, and then tosses the key in my direction. It lands right between my knees. It's on a metal ring with a black marble-sized sphere on it.

"Keep it safe."

I fumble the key ring into my pocket, shoving it down as far as I can.

"Now listen! The key only unlocks my handcuffs, not yours. I want you to—" He breaks off, gasping, and flails in his restraints like he's being slapped. His face contorts in a grimace of pain.

"What's wrong?" I'm trying to hide my terror, but I'm pretty sure my voice gives it away.

Brendan leans forward, propping his hands against his thighs. "To hide underneath the camper," he finally finishes. "You... should be able to do that with the handcuff on."

I shake my head. "Why should I hide?"

"Just do it," he says in a tight voice. The veins in his temples are so swollen, they look like they might burst at any second.

I turn away. In the distance, the first flashes of lightning dance in the sky, pale spirits with hundreds of spindly arms. The clouds overhead are thick and grey; only their edges gleam metallic violet.

"You can throw the key back to me in the morning, got it? Tomorrow morning, not before!"

"Why? Brendan? What's wrong?"

"It's getting dark... and when it gets dark, death comes." He sounds like a small child in a horror movie. A chill runs through me. He walks backward, slowly, step by step. "Keep the key safe. Otherwise, we'll never get out of here." With that, he starts circling the tree in a wide arc. His hands are balled into fists, his shoulders rounded, like he's getting ready for a fight. He disappears behind the spruce and into the thicket.

Oh, God, what's he doing?

I listen, but hear only frightening stillness. I start to wonder whether this is all some kind of sick game. At the next thunderclap,

he's going to jump from behind the tree and strangle me with the chain. Maybe he's got a spare key.

Suddenly I remember what he said about hiding. I get down flat on my stomach and worm my way under the camper—slowly, so that I won't put too much pressure on my shackled wrist. The other cuff is attached to a steel eye that there's no way I'll ever break loose. The tips of my fingers throb. The metal cuff digs into my wrist. I can't stay on my stomach without cutting off my circulation, so I roll onto my back, clenching and unclenching my hand to get the blood flowing again. After that, I look over at the tree again, but I still don't see Brendan.

I wriggle out a few inches, just enough that my left side is peeking out from under the camper. A low-flying swarm of mosquitoes buzzes around my nose, and several of them land on my upper arm. I couldn't care less. They can suck me dry as long as I live through tonight somehow.

"Brendan?" I call, but in a muted voice. "Where are you?"

Silence.

Lightning creases the sky, and the lead-grey clouds light up in a sea of white for several seconds, which makes everything seem much darker afterward.

It's getting dark.

What did he mean by that?

"Brendan? Say something!"

The underbrush crackles somewhere between Brendan and the alpine rose bush, to the right of the spruce tree.

A shadow races out of the forest toward me. I scream, but it's just an ermine, zigzagging through the small cove Brendan's parked in, its tail fluttering behind it like a feather boa. With an elegant leap, it dives back into the cover of the trees. I exhale in relief, but then thunder fills the air.

Brendan isn't the only problem here. I slide further back beneath the RV, which hopefully will protect me from lightning. Hopefully. But what if Brendan gets hit by lightning? I'll starve to death under here. Months or years from now, some lonely hiker will find me here—a decomposed corpse whose bony hand has slipped out of the

handcuff. Or maybe I'll get so thin that I can slide my own wrist through the ring and save myself?

Another burst of lightning illuminates the sky again, but I only see the tail end this time. The air is so heavy with the coming rain that I can taste it. The thunder follows soon after. There's still no sign of Brendan.

A ghostly veil of grey settles over the clearing. Finally, the pattering overhead begins, like fingers drumming on a table, faster and faster. And then from one second to the next, the clouds burst so violently, it's like someone's pouring pails of water onto us. I slide completely under the camper, but keep close enough to the edge that I can still peek out—not that I would be able to move much further with the handcuff anyway.

The sky above me is a raging battle between ghostly white light and raven-black darkness, between rain and wind. The echoing thunder makes the cove seem endless. Rivulets of rainwater run down the sides of the camper; a few droplets follow the pipes and drip onto me from the undercarriage.

It's like the ground has opened up and swallowed Brendan.

To keep my mind occupied, I count the seconds between lightning and thunder.

Twenty-one... twenty-two... twenty-three…

An ear-splitting howl shatters the night into a thousand pieces. I jerk upright and smack my head on a pipe. The screams sound neither human nor animal—more like a mix between the two. A dying animal and a man being beaten to death.

Shuddering, I peer into the thicket. It takes a moment for the fragments of night, howling, rain, and tree trunks to fit together like puzzle pieces.

There's a shape near the spruce tree Brendan has himself chained to, a horrible shadow dancing back and forth, like a boxer who keeps taking hard left hooks to the face and then winding up to strike back. The shrieking is so loud that it drowns out the thunder. I plug my ears as best I can, but it doesn't help. The sound penetrates into my bones like it's trying to tear me apart.

Abruptly, the horrifying noise stops. In the empty space left behind where the wild howling was, the rain is even eerier, like there's a hole in the night itself. I stare at the spruce, transfixed.

When the next burst of lightning hits, I recognize Brendan, standing there as though turned to stone. In the darkness, his face shines as pale as the moon; his eyes seem hollowed out. He's looking at me. I think he is, anyway. He's staring at me without seeing me.

"I'll kill you!" he suddenly thunders in a voice that seems to shake the air around him. "Do that again and I'll kill you!" He runs toward me.

I clamp my hand over my mouth to keep myself from screaming. The chain stops him, though, just feet from the camper. He jerks on the metal handcuffs like a madman; blood and rain are streaming down his palms, but he doesn't stop. He pulls against his restraints with all his strength, roaring. The tree bends. The branches sway back and forth, creaking. A thin twig snaps.

Another peal of thunder directly overhead makes him stop. He stands utterly still in the pouring rain, his hair whipping his face in the wind. His lips are moving, he's whispering, I can't hear him. Abruptly, he clamps his hands over his eyes like a scared little boy.

I just lie there. Wet, trembling. I have absolutely no idea what's going on.

Eventually, the rain subsides a little and his voice gets loud enough that I can hear him, but he's not talking to me anyway.

"How could you possibly think she loved you? That she'd come back? How could *anyone* ever love a worthless piece of crap like you? You're nothing. A bastard. A weakling. Nobody wants you. *Look* at you! There you go, crying again. Didn't I tell you to quit sniveling like a little girl? Didn't I tell you what would happen, you pathetic little shit? You want to play dead again?"

Thunder and lightning chase each other across the sky, hunting one another. Bren sinks to his knees.

My heart hammers wildly, full of panic and dread.

"Tell me what you are, I want to hear you say it!" he screams, and then his upper body tenses up. "I'm nothing," he whispers, so

softly that I can only hear him because he's so close, and because the rain has let up. His fingers dig into the ground. "She left me. Anybody would have. I'm nothing. Nobody can love me. I should be dead. Buried in the ground, in the darkness... I'm nothing..."

I wriggle through the muck on my back and crawl out from underneath the camper so that I can sit on my knees. I can't let myself think about what's wrong with him. If I do, I'll freak out.

"Brendan," I say urgently, not too loudly, not too quietly. The rain has died down to just the occasional fat raindrop, but the wind is howling through the treetops like it's sweeping across earthen jars. Hopefully it doesn't bring any branches down on us.

"Bren-dan!" I stretch out an arm in his direction.

He looks at me, but I'm positive that he still isn't seeing me. He's still caught in some kind of hallucination.

"Everything's okay." I fight the quaver in my voice. "I'm still here. See? I didn't leave you." Slowly, so as not to startle him, I lower my arm. Obviously I know that he must be talking about someone else leaving him, but I don't know what else to say. "I'm not going to leave, okay? I promise. I'll stay sitting right here the whole night. Until morning. And then I'll give you the key back."

I'm not sure whether it's what I'm saying that calms him down or just the sound of my voice, but he stops clawing at the ground obsessively. It's a small victory, but it gives me the courage to keep talking. "But I can't aim very well, you know. I've always been bad at hitting targets from a distance—like throwing rocks at cans or whatever, you know?" For a moment, I wonder if he really does know that. "My brothers are good at it." I'm glad he's hearing me but not actually hearing me. "Especially Jayden." A lump forms in my throat. This is all too much. I feel like crying. About everything. Crying for myself, crying for my brothers, crying over the lies that led to me ending up here, with him. Maybe even crying for him, or for whoever he used to be.

But there will be time to cry later, so I force myself to keep talking. "I was afraid of the dark for a long time, too. After my dad died. Darkness and dying, I sort of associated the two for a while. I slept in Ethan's bed for the first couple of months, and I made him

bring my nightlight into his room, the blue star. Even though it made it hard for him to fall asleep. Ethan always did everything for me...” My voice falters. I can’t keep talking about my brothers if I don’t want to burst into tears. Instead, I turn my face toward the sky for a moment. The wind is blowing the clouds along like a herd of black sheep. The rain has stopped completely now, though it’s still thundering in the distance.

“When I throw you the key tomorrow,” I continue, “I’m, like, definitely going to screw that up. We should come up with a strategy, like what we can do if I miss. You could go find a stick in the underbrush...” I ramble on and on about how long and how thick the stick should be. And then about how in track I can jump farther than I can throw, and about how I wanted to join the cheerleading squad, but my grades were too bad. “I’m actually a really good dancer, though.” It may even be the only thing I’m genuinely talented in, but Ethan never thought it was important. *Dancing doesn’t help you at job interviews,* he always said.

Later, the wind changes, and it starts to sprinkle again. I keep talking, but a clap of thunder interrupts me mid-sentence. Brendan leaps to his feet and stares at the sky with wide eyes. It’s like he can’t cope with his own fear.

“You should be dead, buried in the ground!” he suddenly roars again. “I’ll kill you!”

I press my back against the camper, which twists my left hand painfully. Hearing him yell like that, I suddenly have a horrible fear that he’s going to rip the tree right out of the ground and come at me.

But Brendan disappears behind the spruce once more, like a sick animal hunkering down to die. I hear him mumbling again. “So dark, so dark... in the ground... why did you leave? Don’t stop breathing. Don’t stop breathing. Keep your hands still. Don’t cry. Don’t stop breathing...”

I don’t move a muscle. I promised I would stay there, so I’m not going to hide under the camper, whether he comes back or not. No matter how scared I am.

After a couple of minutes—I think it's minutes, anyway—I shift into a more comfortable position, facing more toward the side so I don't have to bend my hand around. I hug my knees with my free arm to keep warm. Every inch of my body is soaking wet, even my underwear.

This too shall pass, Lou. Tonight will be over eventually, just like last night was. Everything passes. Someday you'll be back home again.

I wait. I wait for the thunder to stop, for Brendan to reappear, for the night to end. It doesn't get as cold as I feared, but eventually my whole body goes completely numb, to the point that I don't even feel the sharp stones under my butt anymore. I just sit there, leaning against the side wall of the camper with one shoulder, collecting rainwater in one cupped hand every so often to still my thirst.

My eyes fall shut occasionally in exhaustion, but the thunder keeps jolting me awake. Probably for the best—I'm afraid to dream.

I keep mulling over what Brendan said. *I should be dead. Buried in the ground, in the darkness.*

What happened to him? Why would he think that? Who did this to him? Maybe when he was shouting, "I'll kill you!" he didn't actually mean me? Did someone say that to him? It sounded to me like he was being two people at once.

It's weird how some things change in such a short time. Until a few hours ago, Brendan was just the horrible kidnapper psychopath that lured me into his trap. The person I was terrified of. The evil, evil guy who gave me knockout drops and stuck me in a box. Who apparently stalked me for months. Until a few hours ago, he didn't have a past—he was my kidnapper, and that was that. Now, all of a sudden, he's a human being with feelings. Someone who's been hurt. Like, really hurt. At least, that's what I'm getting out of everything that's happened tonight.

I think about his eyes, about how they look like they've seen everything. Maybe they have. Maybe I don't want to know. Knowing might frighten me more than I am already.

I rest my head on my knees, but then I see movement from the corner of my eye, so I turn my head to one side. Brendan is sitting with his back against the trunk of the tree, head tilted back like he's stargazing. The sky is still too cloudy for that, though, even if the storm's mostly passed by this point.

Right now, he seems perfectly calm. I'd love to toss him the key so that he could unchain us both and I could return to the warm RV. But he said to wait until morning.

I close my eyes. Raindrops patter softly against my skin. I picture myself at home, in Ash Springs. I see my brothers. They tell me they love me.

I can't hold back the tears anymore.

CHAPTER 9

I haven't slept at all. For the past hour, I've been sitting here looking up at the sky, waiting for it to change color. It's dark at first, with only a few lingering clouds separated by wide stretches of clear sky, like grazing land for stars... but the stars aren't really shining tonight. They seem further away, and colder, like they're made of glass.

Bit by bit, the first hint of grey develops, a seagull grey that spreads in feathery swaths and eventually swallows the stars.

Brendan had another bad attack earlier. I kept talking and talking, and he actually calmed down again. Now I'm hoarse, and I haven't seen him for two hours.

Everything's still. Night transitions into day, accompanied only by the raindrops falling to earth from the treetops. The grey brightens, and soon the sky is streaked with fingers of salmon pink and peach, stretching out further and further. A bird starts singing, a mournful song that seems to fill every corner of the forest. After a few minutes, it's a choir. Later, the ermine races past again, without looking at me.

Tentatively, I rotate my stiff wrists and ankles. Every movement hurts, and I notice for the first time that the hard landing on the forest road left marks. My knees are scraped, and when I run my hand over the painful spot on my forehead, I feel a lump. No wonder, the way Brendan threw me to the ground. I pull the

neckline of my wet blouse down to inspect the blue-green bruises on my upper arms, from where he grabbed me. And there are still patches of fading yellow near my elbows, too—must be left over from his first chloroform attack.

I don't want to look at them. I pull the neckline up again and take a few deep breaths of cool, resin-scented morning air, before fishing the key to Brendan's restraints from my shorts pocket.

I roll it back and forth in my hand, and then try to unlock my own handcuff with it.

"I told you," I hear Brendan say out of nowhere. "It only unlocks mine."

His voice startles me so much that I nearly have a heart attack. He's standing as close as his chain will allow. For the first time, he doesn't look perfect. He looks weakened and tired; there are bluish rings under his eyes, and the skin on his palms is ragged.

I bite my lower lip. Is there any way of knowing what he'll do when I give him the key? He might still be planning on locking me in the box, as punishment for wanting to run away. Right now, when he's acting so normal, it almost feels like last night was a bad dream.

"What happens when I give you the key?"

"I unlock our cuffs."

"And then?"

"And then you should shower." A faint smile flits across his face, as fleeting and jittery as the ermine.

I follow his gaze down my own body. I'm flecked with mud from head to toe. But the word "shower" makes me remember the clothes, the whole reason I panicked. I'm scared to bring it up, scared of the answer I'll get, because it may make him seem more insane than ever. Then again, what could possibly top last night?

"Are you going to punish me by putting me in the box?" I ask in a challenging tone.

"Lord, no, Lou!"

"But you threatened me with it."

"I thought maybe locking you in there would be for the best if I... I mean... if that kind of thing happened." He raises his shackled hands in a strangely helpless gesture.

I force myself not to look away. “What are you going to do then? You’re going to do something, right?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t.” He squats down, at eye level with me, and regards me for several seconds with an expression I’m not sure how to interpret. “I don’t remember what happened last night.”

I stare at my feet.

“Flashbacks, they’re called. Reliving an old traumatic experience. Ever heard of them?”

“On TV,” I say quietly. “But I changed the channel.” At least there’s a name for what happened. Back then, the story hadn’t interested me, it hadn’t had anything to do with me or my life.

“There are different forms of flashbacks. Afterwards, I never remember what I did during them. They start with everything turning black-and-white. Everything gets darker, and seems like it’s moving away from me. Eventually, it’s like I’m trapped inside myself, I’m not aware of my surroundings anymore.”

He doesn’t say anything else, and after a minute or two, I raise my eyes. He’s staring at his scraped palms. “Must have been a bad one,” he says. “I tried to break free, didn’t I?”

I nod.

“Once during a flashback I beat someone unconscious because I thought he was...” He hesitates. “Someone else. That’s why I chained myself up. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“You never want to,” I murmur, narrowing my eyes. “And yet you do. Constantly.”

He hangs his head. “I’m sorry, Lou.” His voice sounds so ashamed, I nearly believe him. Reflexively, I run my hand over my arm; even that soft touch is enough to make my bruises hurt.

“Then why do you do it?” I hiss over at him.

He jerks his eyes up again. “You just can’t run away. There’s no point anyway. I’ll always catch you. The old cat-and-mouse game.”

I’m about one second away from swallowing the key, marble ring and all, just to see the look on his stupid face.

“There are a couple of things that... bring that out in me. Triggers, we call them.”

Aha. So me running away is a "trigger." Okayyy. "Um, are there any others? Seems like something I probably ought to know."

He stands up, lips pressed into a white line. "Yeah, but I don't want to talk about them. Now give me the damn key already."

"You sound so mad. I'm not giving them to you when you're this angry."

He sighs impatiently. "You're still scared."

I look at him with what must be wide eyes, because his expression softens, his features smooth out. "I could never do anything bad to you. What can I do that will make you believe me?"

"Let me go," I grunt.

Another fleeting, ermine smile flickers on his face. "One-zero for you. But you know perfectly well that that's not going to happen. Now throw the keys here so that I can reach them."

I wonder why he's so impatient. I could stall for time, because maybe, just maybe, someone will actually come by. The thought makes my heart beat a little faster. "What if someone finds us here?" I say in a tight voice. "People are looking for me. Maybe the cops will fly over in a helicopter."

"Maybe. Maybe not. The police think you ran away. Same as hundreds of other teenagers every year. So I don't think they're going to go to all the trouble of searching these deserted woods."

"You're lying," I snap. "Of course they're looking for me. That's why you wouldn't let me watch *Find Me*!"

"I'll let you listen to the news if you want. You're not in it anymore. What do you think your friends told the cops?" He gives me a sharp look, and doesn't wait for me to reply. "Your brother's so strict, he doesn't let you do anything... you said yourself that you wanted to take the bus home. Or somewhere else. Trust me, the police have better things to do than run around looking for a rebellious little teenage girl. Give me the key, and I'll let you read the papers from the first couple of days after you disappeared."

Helpless, furious tears spring to my eyes, but I don't want him to see them. I stare at the side of the RV, at the letters spelling out *Travel America*. "That's blackmail," I say in a strangled whisper. "That's not fair, and you know it."

I hear the chain clinking as he moves. "I shouldn't have mentioned it. But you can go on waiting, of course. Until we're both too exhausted to move. Which will be quicker for you than me." I look back at him. He's sitting stick straight, shoulders back, like he's suddenly completely recovered from the long night. "This territory is almost 200,000 square miles and has a population of 30,000. Nobody's going to save you here."

Exhausted, I rest my head on the camper, squeezing the key in my hand. I'm so miserable I could die. The worst part is, I believe him, and there's no sense lying to myself about it.

I turn back toward him and scoot as far forward as possible. He's maybe twenty feet away now—it shouldn't be too hard to throw him the key. Or it wouldn't be for someone less tired and hungry and wet and exhausted and depressed. I can't bring myself to throw.

My hand is trembling. *Come on, Lou!*

But what if he's lying? What if he locks me in the box after all? For days, weeks... a memory shoots through my mind. *You should be dead, buried in the ground!*

"You're really not going to put me in the box?" I ask again.

"Nope." His dark eyes shimmer gently, almost caringly. But he looked the same way when he was warning me about the bears. I have no way of knowing when he's lying and when he isn't.

"But you're going to do something else. You said so earlier!"

"True." He's still looking at me.

"What?"

He sighs. "I won't lie to you. I hadn't planned on keeping you chained up permanently, but I suppose I'm going to have to for a while."

I toy with the keys in my hand. I'm freezing, I'm starving, I'm ungodly tired. And I really, really have to use the bathroom, and I'm not sure how much longer I can ignore it—and I certainly don't want Brendan watching me pee. Maybe stalling is only going to make things worse. Maybe it'll piss him off so much that he'll hurt me after all. Or maybe he's just pretending, waiting for the moment he gets his hands on the key.

I lean against the camper again with my shoulder and look up. A couple of crows glide over the pine-green treetops. Way overhead, I see the jet trail of an airplane. Everything's quiet. No sound of helicopter blades anywhere, no car engines, no voices. Nothing but forest and sky, Brendan and me.

Against all reason, I wait. Brendan doesn't say anything; after a while, he sits down on the ground and starts rotating a pair of rocks around and around in his hand. Time floats by like a bird, silent and weightless. The sky turns to steel blue as the sun rises. The heat licks the moisture from the ground. I squeeze my thighs together, because the pressure in my bladder is almost unbearable.

When I can't take the heat anymore, I roll underneath the camper. I briefly consider peeing my pants down here, but I think I can still hold it for a while.

I keep waiting. Tiny bugs crawl over my arms and legs. I flick them away at first, but after a while I give up. My lips are starting to crack. I try to work out how many people per square mile there are here, if it's 200,000 square miles and 30,000 people. I divide 200,000 by 30,000, but the result doesn't start with a zero, so it must be wrong. I try 30,000 divided by 200,000. Then I rotate onto my stomach as best I can with the handcuff and draw the equation in the dirt, but when I get a zero after the decimal point, I quit in frustration. Zero point zero something. The 30,000 people probably all live in one or two towns, and everywhere else is pretty much uninhabited. I think back to that rusted-out tractor that nobody even bothered to tow away so it wouldn't block the forest road.

Canada. This has to be Canada. The US has states, not territories. Especially not such sparsely populated ones. I'm pretty sure, anyway.

But why would I believe anything Brendan says? That thing about the population might not be true at all. I close my eyes.

"If you're trying to provoke me," Brendan says abruptly, "it's about to work." I see him kick a rock through the air with one dark biker boot.

"I'm waiting for someone to come rescue me," I call from underneath the camper.

"Not gonna happen."

"We'll see about that."

"Yeah, we will."

I keep waiting, but Brendan's creaking footsteps and the rustling underbrush when he briefly disappears into the woods are the only human sounds, besides the ones I make myself. Other than that, all I hear are the light and dark twittering of the forest birds, the drawn-out cawwws of the crows, the buzzing bees, and the spruce trees groaning in the sunshine. Once in a while, I see something small and soft dashing back and forth in the trees. Could be the ermine again, or maybe a marten or a chipmunk. Hundreds of white butterflies flutter amid the strips of lilac-colored willow herb scattered at the feet of the spruce trees.

If we really are in Canada, there are grizzlies here, too. It's weird: I didn't think about bears once last night. There were so many other things to be afraid of. Now the idea's in my head, but they seem a lot less scary than they did a few days ago. Maybe because I was underneath the camper, so I know the bear would have attacked Brendan first.

The light gets thinner; the shadows lengthen. A woodpecker jabs at a tree somewhere nearby, a monotone hammering sound that comes and goes. Still no sign of other human life out here. I begin to accept the fact that nobody will ever find me. Not alive, at least. Every bone in my body hurts; my bladder is aching, and hunger is eating a hole in my stomach. I've barely eaten anything in seven days now. I didn't touch a bite at breakfast yesterday. The only thing I ate was a sandwich Brendan brought me when he took a short break. I haven't had much to drink, either.

I've never felt so alone in my entire life. The waiting is shriveling my hopes, leaving an emptiness that fills my every pore. And yet my whole body is leaden, like I've inhaled iron. I could keep stretching the wait out, of course—I've heard people can live for two days without water. Maybe even three. But I wouldn't make it that long, not under these conditions, the drugging, the fasting. I remember that endless, lonely stretch of road, where only five cars passed us the whole day. Five! And I think about Brendan, whose pacing

sounds more and more impatient with every passing hour. I hear him cursing softly. If I don't give him the key back until the very last moment, right before I die of thirst, I'll definitely feel his wrath. Besides, I really don't want to pee my pants.

It's late afternoon when I crawl out from underneath the camper, stiff-limbed. I don't even ask Brendan whether he's going to do something to me, whether he's going to lock me in the box. I don't want to think about anything anymore.

Brendan is silent as well, though his expression is one of relief.

I crawl as far forward as I can. This time, I don't think before I throw, I just do it. Without looking at him.

The key flies past Brendan, but he picks it up. I stare at the ground, listen to the locks clicking. Once, twice. Heavy footfalls in my direction.

Suddenly I'm terrified after all, pressing myself against the camper, shaking, yanking at the handcuff.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he barks furiously. He squats down beside me and unlocks the handcuff. A winged patch of sweat is spreading across his T-shirt. It reminds me of the watercolor butterflies Jay and I used to make by putting globs of paint on the paper and then folding in half. Except it's black, not colorful.

When Brendan stands up, I briefly imagine the butterfly spreading its wings and lifting Brendan into the air. Carrying him far, far away. Then we'd both be free.

"Come on, up! You need to drink something." He grabs my arm. I can't help gasping in pain.

He releases me immediately. "What's wrong?" he asks, brow furrowed.

"I can do it myself." I scramble to my feet, using the side of the vehicle for support. I definitely do not want him to see what he did to me.

"What's wrong?" he repeats. "Are you hurt?"

"No!" I fold my arms. He has no right to know how I feel. Everything about me that he doesn't know already, I don't want him to find out. I want to protect that information from him. Even the injuries that he gave me.

He grabs my wrist; his jaw juts out. “I don’t believe you. Let me see.”

“I banged my arm,” I say evasively. “It’s no big deal.”

“Banged your arm, hm.” He rolls up the sleeve of my blouse. I don’t fight him, since I know he’s going to win. There’s no point in resisting pointlessly over and over, just to remind myself of how helpless I am.

“Oh, shit,” he breathes when he reveals the blue-green bruises; a couple of spots are nearly black. “Both arms?”

I nod and stare past him at an alpine rose bush with dark rosehips.

“That won’t happen again,” he says through gritted teeth. “Never. You have my word, no matter what happens.”

“Don’t make any promises you can’t keep.” I yank my arm away and unroll the sleeve again. “But even then... do you seriously think these bruises are worse than everything else you’re doing to me? Trust me, you could beat the crap out of me, rape me, whatever, I wouldn’t care as long as you dropped me off by the side of the road afterward.”

He flinches like he’s been slapped. For a moment, I think he’s going to punch me in the face. I suppose that’s when he remembers the promise he made two seconds ago.

“You don’t know what you’re saying. You’re completely out of your head. Go on, get inside.” He points to the side door with his chin, hands balled into fists.

I don’t need to be asked twice. I cut a wide berth around him as I climb back into my dungeon.

I wait until I’m in the shower to peel myself out of my clothes. My shorts get caught on my scraped knee, tearing the skin open all over again. Blood runs down my leg in thin rivulets, and the wound burns a little, but it’s almost like it’s happening to someone else.

There’s no driving away the emptiness in my soul. At this point, I wouldn’t even care if Brendan came in and saw me naked. Anyway, he already has, if it’s true about him putting me on the toilet. I toss

my clothes out of the shower onto the floor, slide the plastic door closed and turn on the hot-water tap. Soon, the tiny room is filled with steam. I let the water run over my head. It's hot, almost scalding, but the pain helps.

I soap up with the shower gel and the shampoo Brendan gave me. The shower gel smells like herbs; the shampoo, like moss. I wonder whether there's a way to get water hot enough to burn grief out of your insides. Or memories out of your head. I want to wash everything out of me, but most of all, I want to wash the images of my brothers from my mind. Not the ones I'm always picturing, but the ones I won't let myself picture, and they still won't go away. The images of their faces when they realize that I've disappeared. Like, really disappeared, not run away. I know they don't actually believe that. They may have considered the possibility at first, but once they realized I wasn't at home, they must have known something bad happened to me. They know how much I love them. Even Ethan knows that, despite what I said to the contrary. I would never run away. My eyes fill with tears under the spray, which is getting progressively hotter. I picture Ethan checking his watch and looking worried when I don't return from the visitors' center. Walking through the dark campground, calling my name. Cringing in fear at the thought of what may have happened to me.

Deep sobs well up from within me and wrack my body. I can't hold them back. I don't think I've ever cried so desperately in my life.

I pull the showerhead down and hold my face right against the hard spray, wishing the water could dissolve me. The heat is breathtaking, chokes off my sobs. I want to drown.

I'm so sorry, Ethan. I'm so sorry I told you I hated you. I'm sorry I went with him. I'm sorry he's got me captive and you're worried to death back home. I'm sorry I can't give you some sign of life. I'm sorry I always gave you so much trouble...

There are so many "I'm sorry"s in my life. So many.

The spray abruptly shuts off. The sudsy grey water on the floor of the shower is past my ankles.

I stare as though hypnotized at the barely dripping showerhead, sure that this is Brendan's way of forbidding me from burning myself.

"You used all the water in the tank," he calls from the other side of the door. "It'll be a minute before I can fill it up again."

His words pass straight through me. I take the towel I hung on the doorknob and wrap it around myself.

"You all right?"

I nod, although he can't see it.

"Louisa. Everything okay?"

Nothing will ever be okay again. I take a few long breaths. My skin is lobster red. It's weird: I'm in pain, like terrible-sunburn pain, but I don't feel anything. Everything seems backwards.

Brendan flings the door open and stares and me like I'm a mutant. Then he shakes his head, but doesn't say anything. I notice a scratch across his forehead. Probably from me. It should make me happy, but it doesn't. Finally, he returns to the kitchen.

I walk to the back part of the RV on autopilot, fold the door closed, and sit on the bed. A stoic calm settles over the emptiness inside me. I rummage through the pile of clothing I ripped from the closet, fishing out shirts one by one until I find something that isn't a replacement for a top I own back home. A black boat-neck T-shirt. He may have picked it because he likes that style, I guess, but even that makes no difference to me anymore. I keep poking around until I find some knee-length jean shorts. With shirt and shorts in one hand, I climb onto the bed and open the overhead cabinet. I give the underwear a quick once-over. Simple stuff, no lace, no ruffles. Most of the bras and panties are plain white and exactly my size. I pluck out one of each at random, unwrap the towel and get dressed.

Then I just sit there, staring straight ahead. All my senses are deadened.

At some point Brendan comes in holding a tray. He makes sure I eat a bowl of oatmeal and drink two glasses of water. After that, he rubs some kind of brown tincture on my right wrist and then re-dresses it. I have no idea when or how the old bandage came off. I didn't notice how badly it hurt until now. But even this pain doesn't affect me. It's happening to someone else.

"Hopefully it doesn't get infected," I hear him murmur. He bandages my left wrist, too. Just to be safe, he says. I understand what he means. Just to be safe, because I'll be wearing the shackles from now on. And the skin around my left wrist is already reddening.

Once he's done with my wrists, he rubs a salve on my upper arms and elbows. It smells like pine needles and rosemary. After that, he disinfects the scrapes on my knees.

I guess he doesn't have anything for my soul.

When he finishes, he returns the first-aid stuff to the kitchen. Then he comes back, removes the cuff from my wrist, and puts it on my ankle. He attaches the other side to the iron chain, which is still hanging on the wall, firmly anchored.

He gives me a questioning frown from the frame of the folding door. "You weren't serious about that earlier, were you?" His arms are crossed.

Instead of answering, I mess with the fabric of the T-shirt. It's kind of therapeutic to twist and squeeze the material, pretending it's Brendan's neck.

"That you wouldn't care if I raped you and beat you half to death if I would drop you by the side of the road afterward?" His pupils are pinpoints. I see the color of his irises for the first time: dark brown, not black. He shakes his head in disbelief. "I must really be a monster."

I close my eyes and try to ignore him.

"I just want to have you with me. That's all."

That's all. Yeah, right.

"I won't touch you again—especially not in the way you think I would. Not as long as you don't want me to."

I would love to ask him if he actually buys his own bullshit. If he's seriously planning on keeping me with him forever, eventually he won't be able to stop himself. Eventually my grace period will run out, that's a given. Tomorrow. The day after tomorrow. Next week. Next year. Depending on what his testosterone levels are like.

"I'll wait until you're ready. I promise."

I look at him. His eyes are shimmering, a mixture of longing and skittishness, as if he's been waiting for this day to come with both

anticipation and dread. It's an expression I've never seen in his eyes. But before I can figure out what it might mean, the shimmer fades, and he's as confident as ever.

"That's never going to happen." My voice cracks. "Ever."

He gives me that same intense look, the one that squeezes the air out of my lungs every time.

His pupils flow outward, like midnight-black ink in a glass of water. Without taking his eyes off me, he uncrosses his arms and holds his tattered wrists up in front of my face. They're both completely red and raw, but the left one still has that braided armband with the silver coin on it.

It dangles down sadly, like a tear that refuses to fall.

"This time," he says in a dark voice as I stubbornly stare at the coin instead of at his wounds, "you were lucky. I was able to chain myself up in time. I might not make it next time. So think carefully about whether you want to try and run off again."

He glances at the chain. "Assuming I ever give you a chance to try."

CHAPTER 10

The next few days drift past as if I were sitting in a train watching them through the window. Everything's far away. The morning after Brendan re-did my bandages, he refilled the tank. Grey water, he called it. I don't know where he got the water, and I don't care. Nothing is important anymore. I don't even mention the newspaper reports—I don't want to ask him for anything at all.

We hit the road every morning after breakfast, and usually keep traveling until the sun is low on the horizon. The temperature's been dropping steadily, which makes me think that we really are heading straight north. Maybe we're in British Columbia, maybe Alberta, maybe the Yukon or the Northwest Territories. The fissured landscape looks about how I would picture Northern Canada, anyway: craggy mountain ridges with endless green valleys, wild rivers, lots and lots of trees.

The birches and aspens are fewer and further between here; it's a primeval forest of pines, firs, and spruces, atop a carpet of dead wood, ferns, and willow herb. Here and there, a lake stretches out to one side, glittering and blank like the turquoise eye of a giant.

But wherever this is, it's at the end of the world, a place whose sheer expanse makes me shrink a little more each day. Maybe I really will be just a pale shadow before too long.

Sometimes I find myself thinking about Jay's stories. One of them was about a Native American who was born with grey skin. He

turned into a shadow in the forest, too. An outcast, unseen, abandoned, until finally he only talked to the animals. But he got a happy ending, because Jay wrote the story especially for me, and I love happy endings.

Too bad it doesn't look like I'm getting one of my own. Brendan doesn't make mistakes—after that night we both spent chained up, I can see that more clearly than ever. Whoever caused him so much suffering also made sure that Brendan turned out unrelentingly tough. Tough, strong, and calculating. He listens to a lot of Nickelback and Green Day as he drives, which always takes me back to memories of my brothers.

I've never felt so hopeless in my entire life. Even in the evenings, when the iron chain and I are theoretically allowed to join him at the campfire, I stay inside and peek out at him every so often—maybe just so I can see another human being. He mostly sits around staring into the flames, smoking an occasional cigarette, and every other night he spends some time scribbling in that notebook.

When dinner's ready, he brings me grilled meat and vegetables, or occasionally fish. I barely touch any of it.

Once in a while, I try to calculate how much time has passed since I was kidnapped. In movies, the victims carve notches in wooden chairs to mark the days, but I don't even have the energy for that. I was unconscious for five days, and I remember two days after that, and it's probably been another week since I tried to escape. If I were a doctor, maybe I could work it out based on how much my wounds have healed, or the color of my bruises. As it is, I can only guess.

I barely notice my surroundings anymore, because I spend almost all my time sleeping or thinking about the life I used to have.

After a few, I stop eating entirely, and stop leaving the bed. My memories are a magnet drawing me inward; my brothers' voices dance around me like wind chimes. They shout my name, hold me tight. I try to call every little inflection to mind—their words are clearer than their faces.

Today, I find Liam's voice first.

Go on, go catch the rhino! He's eating our raspberries again, that bad little rhino!

He laughs. I swing myself out of bed. The soles of my bare feet hit the warm wooden floor of my room—a familiar, comforting sensation. I hear myself giggling, feel myself running without seeing myself. Quick, pattering little footsteps into the yard. The herby smell of sagebrush wafts in through the open veranda door. Warm wind caresses my skin. Dishes clatter in the kitchen.

Liam, come help me with breakfast, Ethan calls.

I'm playing with Lou-u.

You should be practicing multiplication with her, not putting more silly ideas in her head!

I keep running through the dry grass; a thistle pokes my toe, making me squeal. I grab the invisible lasso out of the air, feel the rough leather against my fingers, hear it whistle in the wind.

I caught it! I caught it!

It takes all of my strength to drag the rhino to Liam. It's pulling against me, and I have to brace my feet against the ground. I'm giggling like crazy.

What should I do with him now, Liam?

Rope it to the post!

You mean like tie it to a stake?

No, just tie the rope around the post so it doesn't run off. You could tame it!

I lead the rhino to the end of the veranda and tie it up. It takes a lot of knots to keep it in place.

Heavy footfalls thudding on the wooden floors behind me. Dishes banging down on the table. I hear Ethan and Liam talking. I'm still hard at work—tying up a wild pink rhino properly is a difficult job—but eventually their conversation reaches my ears.

The kids at school are going to make fun of Lou when they find out that she's still playing with imaginary animals at her age. Is that what you want?

I just want to make her laugh, I hear Liam say. *It hasn't been that long since Dad...*

Silence. They've remembered that I'm there. I forget the rhino and run back, reach for Liam's warm hand. It's so large, it swallows mine up. I want to tell him that I can still laugh even though I miss Dad. That I have everything I could ever want. And that I wouldn't trade my brothers for anything in the world. But before I hear myself say anything, I startle upright, and I'm back in the present.

The next time, it's Avery's voice floating down to me. It's soft, nearly a whisper.

We'll bring you home as soon as they'll let us.

Quiet murmuring. Hospital smell. Swallowing is painful, and one part of my stomach hurts really bad. I want to cry, but I don't want Avery to think I'm a crybaby. It's bad enough having Jay tease me about it all the time.

The doctor says the operation went well.

Tender fingers stroking my forehead.

Is Ethan here, too?

No, sweetheart. He has to work. He'll be here later. And Liam's coming tomorrow.

I wanna go home. When can we go home?

Soon. Very soon.

The next time, the voices are different. My classmates' voices. Wild chatter.

Hey, Lou, is it true that Ethan and Avery are gay?

No, they aren't.

Elizabeth says they never bring girls home.

So?

So that's weird.

Is not. If every one of my brothers brought a girlfriend home, there'd be five girls there. Which would be hell!

You're sure Ethan's not gay?

Positive.

Does he have a girlfriend?

No. Of course not.

Why of course not?
He doesn't have time for that stuff.
Maybe you could introduce me...
He's twelve years older than you, Liv. He likes women, not girls.

I wonder if I'm the reason my brothers didn't bring girlfriends over. I can't remember Ethan ever having one. Avery had a Claire and then a Marie, but they never came over, or at least not that I saw. Jay's had a bunch of girlfriends, but only ever for a week at a time. And Liam supposedly had some brief, passionate relationship in India, and has been celibate ever since.

Maybe that'll change now that I'm gone. As they start forgetting about me.

My head is silent and empty.

Empty and silent.

It scares me.

The thought of their love for me becoming as pale and invisible as I am grips my heart like an iron fist.

Someday, everything will be gone. The hunger, the memories, their voices... and all that'll be left is me.

And him.

"You have to eat. If you don't do it voluntarily, I'll force you." His tone isn't a friendly reminder. It could cut glass.

I stare at the ceiling and don't see it.

The mattress gives as he sits on the edge of the bed beside me. I lie there as though turned to stone.

"I always loved how full of life you were. It was like nothing could bring you down."

I have the urge to swallow, but don't.

"I know exactly how you feel right now. It's like you're lying in a glass coffin, dead but not buried. You can see and hear everything around you, but everything is muted. The sky could be bright blue, but for you it's grey. When you reach out to touch something, all you feel is cold glass."

I turn my head in his direction, shocked at how well he just summarized it.

"I wish there were a way to make this more bearable for you. I wish I could be the one to shatter that glass for you. But I was the one who put it there." He lowers his head and wipes his face as though drying secret tears. "I should have taken a different girl and spared you."

Normally, hearing that would have made me either furious or deeply sad, but I don't have the energy. Even breathing is exhausting.

"I'm going to bring you some food now, and then you're going to come sit by the fire with me." From one second to the next, he's gotten himself back under control again. He doesn't sound like he's going to tolerate any protest, and I'm too tired to put up a fight anyway.

Eyes fixed on the ceiling, I listen to him work in the kitchen. He switches the TV on and puts on a music station. Nickelback, Satellite. After a few minutes, a tea kettle whistles, and I hear soft, scraping sounds.

Shortly after that, Brendan returns to the back room. I rotate my head in his direction. He's standing in front of the bed, bearing a tray with a bowl and a glass of milk.

"I made you some oatmeal with grated apples—anything else would probably hurt your stomach. And, Louisa, I'm not leaving until you finish it."

Something stops me from sitting up. I just... can't. Finally, Brendan pulls me upright like I'm a vegetable. He stuffs the blanket behind my back and then sets the tray on my lap.

"Eat!" His gaze is even more piercing than his voice. When he looks at me that way, I don't dare do anything but follow orders.

My fingers shake as I reach for the spoon, and I withdraw my hand, not wanting him to see it.

But Brendan doesn't let me out of his sight. He walks around the bed and then sits on the other side. "We'll be staying here for a while," he says, "so you won't have to spend the whole day in the back room anymore."

I try again to put the spoon into the bowl. It hits the edge a few times, but I manage to eat. I swallow mechanically, without chewing. Knowing that Brendan won't leave until I clean my plate is motivation enough. I want to be alone, I don't want to stay anywhere for too long, because that will mean that he doesn't have to drive, so he'll have time for me. I glance over at him from out of the corner of my eye, and he meets my gaze. That same question is in his eyes, the one I saw back at the visitors' center.

Do you want this?

Hastily, I avert my eyes. My hands are still trembling. It just doesn't stop.

Brendan's taken the handcuffs at the other end of the chain, the ones that were holding it to the grip bar, and attached them to his own wrist.

"Now we're connected, you and I," he says with a smile. "I can imagine worse fates."

He threads the key onto a carabiner on his belt. He's started doing that regularly—maybe he thinks it's safer or more practical that way, I dunno. He uses the chain to pull me outside, like a pet keeping him company.

I stop for a second on the steps of the camper and glance around at the spot he's decided to stay put in.

The sun is already down, so at first all I see is the pale red glow of the campfire. We're completely surrounded by trees, of course, but I figured as much, since Brendan never parks for the night without spending hours following a bunch of narrow, bumpy off-roads through the woods. I follow him, cautiously, almost as if I'm afraid one false step and I'd break my leg. It feels like I've had the flu for three weeks.

He sinks contentedly into a camping chair by the fire and gestures to the other one. I scoot the chair slightly away from him and then perch on the edge of the seat, ready to jump to my feet at any moment.

A cold breeze blows underneath my sweater, making me shiver despite the fire. The flames and the smoke twitch back and forth in the wind; sparks leap from it and fly off like red glowworms. A few of them land on my shirt, but go out immediately.

"The night air will do you good," Brendan says. "You look like a ghost."

I stretch my fingers toward the licking flames. Warmth flows over my skin like water.

"Shh, be quiet for a second." Brendan leans slightly toward me as though he's about to tell me a secret.

I was quiet already, so I'm not sure why he would say that. Maybe just as an excuse to talk to me.

I listen, since I don't exactly have a choice. The logs in the fire are cracking like hazelnuts. Behind that, I notice something else. A soft splashing sound, like a murmuring brook.

"Water." Brendan nods, as though reading in my expression that I'm hearing it. "Water is good. We can use it to fill the tanks, so we can stay independent for longer."

Hearing the word "independent" makes my stomach cramp. I don't want to be independent. I don't want to be here at all. I hold my hands closer to the flames and stare past Brendan toward the forest, though I can't make out anything but darkness. The heat of the fire is nearly burning my fingers, but I don't pull them away. I need the pain. Somehow the fresh air makes me feel worse than the camper did. On the bed, I can convince myself that I'll wake up eventually. Out here, the nightmare is way more real.

"You don't want to talk to me, then?" Brendan fumbles a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. He fingers one out and lights it with a Zippo.

A couple of wolves are howling in the distance. It sounds a little like wind whistling through an old chimney, multivoiced. We heard coyotes every so often in Ash Springs, but this howling is deeper and wilder, it's nothing like dogs.

Brendan regards me appraisingly. In the darkness, he looks like a wolf himself. Black fur, black eyes. Eyes made for hunting. Hunter's

eyes. Probably has a hunter's heart, too. It's only a matter of time until he bags his kill.

"Why me?" I whisper. It sounds deafeningly loud in my ears, even with the howling in the forest.

"Why not you?" He takes a drag with relish, as a provocative gesture. I don't know why he sometimes pretends he wants to make this bearable for me, and then one second later he's back to acting all superior.

Meeting his eyes takes every ounce of my willpower. "You said you should have kidnapped another girl, right? So I wasn't the only girl you were considering? Did you have a list or something?"

Smoke billows out of his mouth. No other muscles in his face move. "I think you misunderstood."

I pull my hand back a little. "What is there to misunderstand?" I ask in a quiet, but cool voice. "You stalked a few different girls, and finally you picked me." God, I hate him so much!

"I checked out a few different girls, but I never planned on kidnapping one. Until I found you."

"Found? Where did you find me?" Now I'm completely confused. His voice echoes in my head: *I checked out a few different girls...*

"You'll have to figure that out for yourself. It's actually not that hard, though, if you think it through." He takes another drag. I suppress the urge to stuff the cigarette into his mouth, lit end first.

"Anyway..." He leans back, and I feel a slight jerk on the chain connecting us. "There was never another option besides you." He tosses the butt of his cigarette into the fire and gazes into the dancing flames, watching them hop back and forth vivaciously. "I saw you and wanted you. I would have done whatever had to be done. Anything. I know that sounds ridiculous, and heartless, and frightening. And I'm not going to try and convince you that I'm a good person or anything." His gaze shifts from the fire back to me, enveloping me in shadow. "Because I'm not."

An icy shudder runs down my spine.

He runs his hand across his forehead. "I just want you to understand why I had to do it."

"Well, I don't," I grunt.

Brendan slides forward slightly, so that he's sitting on the edge of his chair, too. "When you concentrate on your heartbeat, what do you feel?"

"My heart, what else?"

"Just try it."

"I don't want to."

Brendan slides his hand underneath his leather jacket and lays it flat against his chest. For a moment he looks like he's holding his breath... or like he's afraid. "All I feel are the spaces in between. Emptiness. Darkness."

So dark, so dark... under the ground... why did you leave? Don't stop breathing, don't stop breathing...

"Which is why you kidnapped me," I snap to push the depth of his words as far away from me as possible. I don't want him to touch me. Inside or out.

"Yeah," he says solemnly, and there's a strange look of liberation in his eyes. "It's not as bad with you here."

I can't look at him any longer, so I stare into the fire instead. He seems so different when his mask of confidence falls away. I don't have any idea who he is. That may actually be the thing about him that frightens me the most: I can't figure him out.

"You said earlier that you would have done whatever needed to be done. To kidnap me, I mean." I struggle to keep my voice steady.

He nods, almost eagerly. Maybe he's glad to see me showing an interest in him. All I'm doing is trying to determine how much danger I'm in, though.

I scoot a little further forward, until I'm barely on the seat at all. "Would you have killed one of my brothers to get at me?"

His eyes turn to black stone; color drains from his face. This probably isn't quite how he pictured our little fireside chat, but it's too late to turn back now.

It takes him a moment to reply. "That's not a fair question, Louisa. There's no way to answer it. If I say yes, you'll be scared and you'll hate me more than ever. If I say no, you won't believe me. So what do you want to hear?"

"The truth."

"The truth is that I've never even considered that question. And you shouldn't have, either. I can't answer it after the fact."

"You're making it easy on yourself," I say in a whisper.

"I could have said no and risked you calling me a liar."

I grip the edge of the chair tightly. "Have you ever killed anyone else?"

He was already pale, but now his face is a death mask. Abruptly, he jumps up and turns his back to me.

For a while, the only sounds are the crackling fire and the rustling of the underbrush. Even the wolves are silent. My heart is pounding so hard, it's making me nauseous.

"Is that a yes? So y-you really..." This changes everything. "I... I want to go inside."

He spins around. "No," he says in an icy voice. "You asked me a question, and I'm going to answer it. Sit down. *Now*."

I drop back onto the edge of the chair as if on autopilot, without taking my eyes off him. Hundreds of horrible visions explode in my head like splinters of glass. Maybe I'm not even the first girl he's done this to.

"It was almost three years ago..." Brendan starts pacing back and forth behind his chair, dragging the chain across the ground behind him and making the cuff around my own wrist scrape across my freshly healed skin. It burns and itches underneath the metal ring, but I try not to let on. Weirdly, pain I cause myself is somehow liberating, but this I can barely stand.

"It wasn't how you think," he says now.

"What do I think, then?" I wish my hands would stop shaking.

Abruptly, he stops in place. "The worst, of course. That I killed someone out of envy, greed, or rage. You're probably picturing how you think I did it. Something especially barbaric or underhanded, I suppose." He lets out a snort of laughter. "Am I right?"

Not wanting to look at him, I stare into the pale-red flames. "How did you do it, then?"

"It was an accident."

Right. Of course.

"It's kind of a long story."

"I only need the short version. And then I'd like to go back inside." Pretending to be strong is exhausting when my whole body is quaking in terror. I'm sure he sees it. He has to. He probably just doesn't care—or he's feeding off it.

"The short version is: we fought, he didn't survive."

"You beat him to death."

"Don't twist my words. There was a fight. We both knew what we were getting ourselves into. There were no rules and a whole lot of prize money."

"So you *did* kill for money."

Brendan comes toward me with a cold look on his face. He stops directly in front of me and leans down. "I hit him and he fell down," he hisses at me. "He broke his damn neck! It wasn't supposed to be a fight to the death."

I stare at his face. At his hard, implacable mouth, his straight nose, the infinite abyss of his dark eyes. There's so much arrogance in that expression, a protective shield of self-confidence. But I've seen other things behind it—as fleeting as fog over the desert around Ash Springs. Too briefly to understand them, but long enough that I can't forget them. It's like he has two faces.

"Maybe your punch is what killed him, how can you be sure?" I know I'm asking to provoke him, to draw something out of him that will tell me who he is.

Brendan props his hands on the arms of my chair and leans closer. I turn my head to one side, trying to avoid him. "Yeah, a lot of other people thought the same thing. Especially the guy's dad and brother." His breath is hot on my ear.

I sit perfectly still. "If there were no rules, it was an illegal fight, and nobody looked into it. Lucky you."

Brendan takes a deep breath. "Go ahead and keep needling me to see whether I'll break my promise. You're going to be disappointed, though. I never hit people weaker than me, even if they try to make me do it."

"You kidnap them instead," I mutter through my teeth.

He makes a noise I'm not sure how to interpret and pushes himself up from the chair arms.

"What are you going to do to me?"

Brendan scoffs impatiently. "I've told you a million times. I'm taking you with me. That's all. You just refuse to believe it."

I jump up, fists clenched. "I do," I say, quietly and coldly. "I do refuse to believe you aren't planning to do something terrible to me. And you know what? I wish you would get on with it already, whatever it is. Do it now. Then it'll be over and you won't have to keep up these nice-guy theatrics."

"I'm. Not. Going. To. Hurt. You." Each word is a growl.

"*Liar*!" I get right up in his face, much closer than I would normally dare. I'm not sure why. Maybe I just want to know whether he's serious or not. "Why are you drawing it out? Because you enjoy watching me suffer? You really are sick. Sick and perverse." I spit in his face.

He stares at me in utter disbelief, pure madness flickering in his eyes. My heart hammers in my throat as I watch the spittle slide down his cheek. Moving even more slowly than the spit, he raises his hand and wipes it off with the sleeve of his jacket.

"Come on!" I scream at him. "Do it already!"

"Yeah." A dangerous whisper, so sharp that I stumble back reflexively. "Yeah, it's time. Something needs to happen." He takes a long step toward me and reaches toward his belt. A moment later, he's clutching a hunting knife.

All at once, I can't move. I'm staring at the blade in a daze, watching the glow of the flames reflect in the surface, golden and red, red like blood.

I was right... I knew it... now he's going to kill me!

Everything's swimming. I barely register that he grabs me by my long hair and drags me toward the camper. Not violently, but emphatically.

"Bren..."

He pushes me against the side wall of the vehicle—almost casually, well aware of his own strength. He'd only need a fraction of it to kill me. He's standing so close that I can't get away. I feel his body. His thighs on my butt. His scent envelops me. Tobacco, firewood, wet earth. I let out a whimper.

"Won't take long," he says with quiet grimness. "And if you hold still, it won't hurt, either." He pushes the back of my head, pressing my forehead against the steel body of the RV. Then he pulls my hair up, twists it in his hand. That one hard jerk is enough to force me to keep still. I can't turn my head. Any moment now, he'll tear my jeans off or slit my throat. I'm dizzy with terror, I can barely breathe. *Just get this over with!*

All at once, he's pulling my hair even harder. My head jerks back and forth a couple of times; my forehead bumps softly against the steel.

Before I can figure out what's going on, I'm yanked away from the wall by the chain. The ground sways beneath my feet, the dark earth comes toward me, but I manage to catch myself at the last minute. I stumble along behind Brendan. What did he do? I look at him. Then I see it.

His right hand is still gripping the leather handle of the knife. His left is clutching a blonde ponytail.

Automatically, I reach up and touch my own hair. The strands are fringed, and end somewhere between my chin and shoulders.

He cut my hair! My beautiful long hair that I was always so proud of!

"So do you believe me now?" With a decisive, almost triumphant swing, he throws the ponytail into the fire, which immediately stinks of singed keratin and sulfur. "Do you think a guy who was only interested in *that* would chop off the girl's hair?"

I watch in stunned silence as the flames consume my hair, crackling greedily. It simply melts away, becomes invisible like me. In a matter of seconds, there's nothing left but ash. Still in disbelief, I pat the feathery ends of my hair a second time.

"Do you believe me now?"

A defiantly spoken question that rotates and rotates. Faster and faster. Right now, I have absolutely no idea what to think or feel. This is too much. Too much homesickness, too much fear, too much despair, too much Brendan. Even too much Louisa. I wonder how I can possibly be invisible to the world when I'm feeling so much that

I can barely take it. My suffering is so enormous, I don't get how nobody else can see it. My heart is too small for this.

I wrap my arms around myself as though my emotions will all come streaming out of me otherwise.

"Do you believe me?" This time, Brendan's voice is quiet and solemn.

I cast a brief, sidelong glance in his direction. He's staring into the fire again, at the place where my hair has finished burning. When he feels me look at him, he turns his head toward me, and I hurriedly avert my eyes.

"You're crying."

"Am not!" I wipe my eyes, furious at myself.

"Because of your hair? It'll grow back."

He doesn't understand anything. How would he? He wasn't torn away from everything he knew and loved. He can't possibly understand that I'm crying because I feel too much. Because I have no way of changing anything. Because I don't feel like I'm me anymore. Me, Louisa Scriver.

"Things couldn't go on the way they were. I needed to make you less scared somehow... well, I tried to, anyway."

"You made me think you were going to kill me."

"I told you I wasn't going to hurt you. All you had to do was trust me. It's not my fault. I wanted... I wanted to make the situation here clear, once and for all."

"So you did what had to be done. As is your nature." My words are tinged with bitterness. Now I know more about him than I wanted to.

He laughs, but it sounds lost and infinitely lonely in the dense forest. "I told you I'm not a good person. Good people do good things."

"And what do you do?"

He regards the blade, and then slides the knife back into its leather sheath. It dangles on his belt, right next to the keys.

He shrugs. "Today, I cut hair. Tomorrow, I'm building rabbit traps. The day after tomorrow, maybe I'll tell you where I found you—if you haven't figured it out by then. Would that be a start?"

It feels more like the end, but I don’t tell him that.

CHAPTER 11

That night, I dream of Ethan. We're sitting on his bed, and weirdly, my blue star night light is plugged into the wall. Ethan takes my hand and places it on his chest. "Feel my heart," he tells me. "What do you feel?"

I focus on the pulse, but there's nothing beneath my fingers. Just coldness.

"Do you feel the emptiness between the beats?"

"Yeah," I whisper.

"That's the place where you're missing. Come back, please come back. It's so dark without you..."

I cry in my dream because Ethan's heart isn't beating anymore. The silence is like a flatline.

Eventually, he shakes my hand off and stands up; his cheeks and the tip of his nose are pale as a dead man's. "When all that's left there is silence," he says, "I've forgotten you. Hurry!"

I startle awake. My back is so sweaty that my shirt is sticking to my skin. I glance around in confusion. The blinds are up, and the moon is shining straight down onto the white bedding. The light in the hallway is on. Brendan must still be awake. I slide toward the window and see him sitting in the camping chair, head propped on his hands, eyes closed like he's sleeping. The campfire has burned down to a pile of pale grey ashes and hunks of charred wood, with the wood moisture-barrier underneath.

The notebook he's always scribbling in is sitting by his feet. The top few sheets are waving in the breeze like white sails. I'm not sure why, but I climb out of bed and walk down the hall until the chain stops me when I reach the sink. Still acting on some strange impulse, I slide the checkered curtains open and squint at the fluttering pages, trying to get a better view. It doesn't look like writing. It's... pictures. He's drawing.

I stretch up on tiptoe and press my forehead against the window. The white sheets of paper are filled with dark blotches—figures, bodies, heads, but all completely black. One looks like a disembodied hand reaching out with distorted or broken fingers. Before I can make out the rest, the top pages flip back to cover it. A shiver spreads over my skin like an icy mantle. I don't particularly want to see what he's drawn, but instinct tells me I need to know. Like maybe it's important, maybe it'll tell me more about him. I blink to focus my eyes, but then Brendan raises his head.

Anxiously, I pull away from the window and step back. My heart thumps in my chest. Hopefully he didn't notice me. I stand frozen in place for a few seconds, but he's apparently too deep in thought to pay the camper much notice. He rests his head in his hands again and closes his eyes. Sitting there like that, he seems as vulnerable as a child.

My hand reaches automatically to my hair. I pluck at the uneven strands. *Do you believe me now?* He sounded like he meant it.

With a strange feeling in my stomach, I close the curtains.

Maybe he really isn't going to rape me. And maybe he's not going to hurt me, either. But maybe this is even worse. If his only goal is to keep me around, he'll do whatever it takes to make that happen. Knock me out for five days, for example. Which means I'll never be free again. My brothers will forget me. I'll forget my brothers. Eventually, the silence between us will be too great.

The next morning, Brendan wakes me before the sun is fully up. He unclicks me and goes to the kitchen. The generator is humming, and I hear the coffee machine burbling.

"After breakfast, I'll show you how to build a rabbit trap." He sounds like he's eager to get started.

"I don't eat rabbits," I reply and walk toward the toilet.

"You might have to one day," he retorts. "When our supply of food runs low, for example." He hesitates a moment, and I shut the door behind me. "Oh, right," he calls loudly enough that I can hear him through the door. "I nearly forgot you're on a hunger strike."

As I wash my hands and face, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror almost by chance, and I nearly jump. I really do look like a ghost: ashen and hollow-cheeked, with blackberry-colored rings under my eyes. My thick, blonde hair hangs down perfectly straight; here and there, a couple of longer strands peek out and tickle my shoulders. I still don't know what to think about the fact that he hacked my hair off so brutally, but I decide to risk believing that his intentions were just as he said. I have to. Otherwise this constant fear of being tortured and killed will drive me insane. I look weird. The short hair makes me look younger, but my thin features make me seem older. This isn't me.

I open the overhead cabinet to search for a ponytail holder, so that my face will look how it used to when I put my hair up. To my surprise, the cabinet is nearly full now: aftershave, several bars of blue soap, lotion, disinfectant, cough syrup, aspirin, Band-Aids, tape, and of course the gauze and the washcloths... I pick out some gauze, fiddle the package open, and then rummage around for scissors, but there still aren't any. No razors, either. Nothing sharp, nothing even close to being usable as a weapon. Instead, I tear off a piece of gauze savagely with my bare hands and use it to tie my hair back. A few strands don't make it into the ponytail and hang loose on either side of my face.

Brendan notices immediately. "You got into the cabinet?" he asks the minute I emerge from the bathroom.

"Is that a problem?"

"No." He smiles.

I retreat to the back room and push the folding door closed before peeling off my dirty jeans and sweaty shirt. Then I open the narrow closet. I still haven't mustered the courage to ask Brendan

how he knew to get all these clothes. Maybe he'll tell me once he reveals where he saw me for the first time.

As I sift through the blouses, a wave of burning homesickness hits me with such force that I have to suppress the urge to pound my head against the wall. I need to put something familiar on today so that I can be me again, even if I don't feel like me. Instinctively, I reach for my favorite shorts with the crocheted hem, but then I change my mind. Too short. Definitely do not want Brendan seeing too much of me. Instead, I pick out the dark capri jeans and the coral-colored blouse with lace trim. After hurrying to put them on, I stand there for a moment, indecisive. My fingers slide along the smooth material of the blouse and close around my pendant.

When all that's left there is silence, I've forgotten you.

I clench the charms more tightly. *Ethan. Avery. Liam. Jayden*. I repeat their names in my head like I'm afraid I might forget them.

"Are you coming or what?" I hear Brendan call.

He can't even let me remember in peace! I take a deep breath, slip my flip-flops on, and go back to the kitchen. Without a word, I slide onto the bench and watch emotionlessly as he takes my left wrist and clicks the free end of the handcuff onto an iron chain. I follow the links of the chain with my eyes until I spot the anchoring plate on the wall underneath the table. He probably has these things all over the camper, and who knows how many chains. I ball my fist automatically, but then open it again right away—I refuse to let Brendan see any more reaction from me.

He plunks a coffee in front of me. It's so sweet I can actually smell the sugar in it. "Want some blueberry pancakes?"

"No." I lift the cup and practically dunk my face in it. The chain clinks with every movement I make, no matter how slight.

"Okay."

I hear him opening drawers near the counter. Zing—two waffles pop out of the toaster. From the corner of my eye, I watch Brendan put them on a plate with several more. He cautiously sprinkles them with powdered sugar, then slides in across from me and places the plate in the middle of the table.

"You look cute with your hair up," he says out of nowhere.

I tense up so quickly that the coffee slops over the side of the cup. *Dammit*!

"Sorry." He sounds exasperated. "Shouldn't have said that."

I peer over at him. After wiping the coffee up with a kitchen towel, he sinks his teeth into a waffle and chews energetically. Our eyes meet, and I look away quickly.

"You need to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"I believe it. But you still have to eat."

"Or you're going to force me to?"

"I'd find a way to get you to eat, trust me." He says it breezily, and it irritates me that he can afford to be so relaxed.

My stomach knots up. "I really do feel sick."

He sighs deeply. "You're eating tonight, promise?"

"Okay. But no rabbit."

He lets out a short laugh that sounds artificial and out of place, as if he's trained himself to laugh in certain situations so that nobody will notice how deranged he is. Like he did in the parking lot at Sequoia.

I stare out the window as he works his way through at least four of the enormous waffles. It's light outside now, and the air around the trees is shimmering. It's not hot, though, so that must be a swarm of tiny mosquitos.

"Can I open the window?"

"You don't have to ask permission on every single thing."

I slide the window open; a cool morning breeze wafts through the screen and envelops me. The woods are full of birdsong, making them seem livelier than they did last evening. A wasp smacks into the screen and speeds away, buzzing.

Maybe I could pretend to like Brendan, pretend I can imagine a future together with him. Maybe then he'd leave the chains off and I could make a break for it. But the idea of being nice to him, of talking to him any more than absolutely necessary, sits in my stomach like a rock. There must be another way.

I regard the trees thoughtfully. They're all conifers about the same height, no more than a couple feet apart—one big, happy

family. “Where are we?”

“Canada.”

“Where in Canada?”

“Doesn’t matter. The important thing is that it’s never as hot here as it is down south, and temperatures can get near freezing at night—last night was comparatively mild. That’s all you need to know.”

I spot a little bird hopping from branch to branch, making the thin twigs near the ground sway. When my gaze slides to the foot of the tree, I see a small group of chipmunks. I long to be out there with them. They’re free, and they aren’t alone. “What other animals are around here?”

“Besides those obnoxious chipmunks?” He leans in and casts a contemptuous glance in their direction. “Rabbits, weasels, different kinds of rodents, elk, wood bison, caribou, red foxes, deer, black bears, grizzlies... and wolves, you heard those last night.”

“I like chipmunks.”

“Well, you’re a girl.” He straightens up. “I’ll give you the grand tour later. You’ll like it here.”

Yeah, no doubt! As I watch him wolf down another waffle, I marvel that someone so slim can eat so much. I look at his bicep, or at least the part of it that’s peeking out from beneath his white T-shirt. It’s smooth, sinewy, lightly tanned. I wouldn’t have guessed that he was that strong. He did seem athletic to me when I first saw him at Sequoia, but I had no idea.

I find myself wondering what kind of guy it was that he was fighting against. Did he underestimate Brendan, too? Did Brendan know the guy was underestimating him? Why would either of them agree to a fight with no rules, where death was a real option? Brendan is still a complete mystery to me. Part of me wants to figure him out; the other part is afraid of what I’ll discover.

I go back to staring out the window while he clears the table and washes up. As usual, he turns the TV on, but the reception is pretty bad today, and *Hero of the Week* is mostly snow. I zone out.

Later, he chains us together again. Probably so that I’ll feel less like a dog he’s walking. Solidarity with the hostage appears to be part of the plan.

As we step outside, I'm immediately greeted by the scent of the woods, of clean air and spruce needles. The sky above the treetops is a brilliant blue, without a cloud in sight.

"Gonna be a warm one today." Brendan's boots crunch on the gravel as he walks once around the camper, and then opens a storage hatch that extends almost the entire length of the vehicle.

"Put on some hiking boots so you can walk in the forest more easily." He reaches into the storage space and then holds out a pair of lace-up ankle boots. "I hope you like them, I made sure to get yellow and pink."

Not wanting to provoke him, I silently put on the socks sitting inside the patterned boots, and then slip the boots on. They fit perfectly, of course.

Brendan tosses my starred flip-flops into the hatch. A couple of neatly stacked cans catch my eye.

"What's in there?" I hurriedly ask before he closes the hatch.

He stops in surprise, but then hooks the cover open so that he doesn't have to keep holding it.

"Supplies. Tons of extra food."

I blink into the opening, baffled. The space is gigantic—it's like the camper's digestive tract, packed tight with boxes, cans, and cartons.

Brendan points around to the different boxes. "Peaches, pineapple, potatoes, peas, beans, corn, sausages, tuna, canned ravioli—sorry, I've always loved that stuff..." He turns to look at me and falls silent. I'm not sure what face I'm making, but he furrows his brow for a moment before continuing. "I brought a bunch of dried pasta, too, no worries, I know you like spaghetti. Plus red sauce and white sauce. And a jar of chopped garlic. The fresh basil may be tricky, but I've got pine nuts... there in the back, on the left." He gestures vaguely toward the corner.

The last shreds of optimism still buried deep inside me begin seeping out very, very slowly, like the air in a balloon someone's holding at the end but hasn't knotted. I blink at the cardboard boxes, dazed. They're all labeled in black lettering: *Medicine, Winter*

Clothes, Bathroom, Games, Hunting. I spot two gas canisters secured near a wooden box.

"Propane," Brendan explains, following my gaze with his own. "We cook with it. And the fridge runs on propane. The two canisters should last us through the winter."

I feel the blood drain from my cheeks. "You want to spend the entire winter here?" Apparently he's not planning on heading for a city any time soon. Or a village. Or any other place humans live in.

"Sure." He gives me a steadfast look. "I plan to stay forever."

He's completely insane. "Won't it be way too cold?" I ask weakly.

"I've thought of everything, Lou, don't worry." He smiles, probably mistaking my horror for worry about my own well-being. "Nothing bad's going to happen to you out here. And besides, civilization is far away, but not completely unreachable."

"So why do you want to catch rabbits if you've got this whole thing packed with food?" I do my best not to let on how shocked I am. I'm barely managing to hold back tears. I wish I'd never seen that storage space.

Brendan shrugs. "Fresh meat is important. Plus we can save food this way."

"But I don't want to eat rabbit." It comes out in a choked whisper.

Sighing, he unhooks the hatch door and lets it fall shut. "I could catch squirrels instead. Or chipmunks." He locks the storage hatch. "Oh, don't give me that look, Lou. I might even bag a deer here and there. Anyway, you don't *have* to eat it. I brought plenty of multivitamins and iron supplements along."

I turn my back to him, wondering whether he enjoys torturing me with his perfect planning.

"C'mon," he says in a cheery voice and tugs the chain almost teasingly. "I'll show you around."

As if he didn't know full well how miserable I am.

Directly beside the camper, behind the row of spruces Brendan built the fire near yesterday, there's a clearing with a small, emerald-

green lake. A narrow waterfall feeds into the lake, glittering like diamonds in the sunlight as it tumbles over a rock ledge.

Step by step, I make my way to the water, over mossy stones, past willow herb, around fir-tree roots. The trunk of a fallen spruce lies directly beside the shore in a bed of ferns, its branches and needles long since rotted. I climb over it and stand close enough to the shore that the soles of my hiking boots are underwater.

A cool breeze rises from the surface, and my bare skin immediately breaks out in goose bumps.

"It's a quiet place," Brendan says from behind me. Of course he's behind me—we're chained together, after all. "Can't hear anything here but the bubbling water and a couple of cheeky birds. Spend a little time here, it's like your spirit dissolves into the ether. You become one with the air and the water."

I try to ignore Brendan. The lake is barely bigger than our property back in Ash Springs. The sky and the trees tremble on its green surface as delicate, transparent reflections.

"This lake always felt like my safe place, like I was protected here."

"What could *you* possibly need protection from?" I ask sarcastically, although the night of the thunderstorm definitely left me with the sense that someone hurt him terribly in the past. My mind automatically shifts to those dark drawings in his notebook.

Even so, I keep walking along the shoreline to show I'm not interested in hearing his response. I know I shouldn't be.

A couple of boulders are scattered along the shore, like game pieces tossed carelessly aside by some long-extinct creature. Some of them extend deep into the lake. I wade past them, muddying the ice-cold water, which swirls around my ankles and seeps into my shoes.

"You can swim here if you want," Brendan suggests now, without acknowledging my question.

"I can't swim," I mumble and eye the waterfall cascading in front of the wall of grey stone.

"You can't swim?" he echoes in disbelief.

"Don't tell me you didn't know that already?" I ask, not bothering to look in his direction. For some reason, we didn't get around to swimming lessons in Ash Springs. Ethan never had time to teach me, and eventually the idea just stopped coming up.

"The water isn't deep. Three feet, maybe." He ignores my snide remark. "You'd be fine, plus I'd be there." He rounds the boulder behind me. "Or I could teach you how."

I have nothing to say to that. It's completely out of the question. I go on staring at the waterfall.

"Look at me, Louisa."

His voice is completely determined again, so much so that I can't bring myself to defy him. It takes me a minute to raise my head.

The longer he looks at me, the more his eyes shimmer. They're mirrors, like the surface of the lake. Bitterness, sadness, impatience—I'm not sure which of them is most prominent. He lifts his hand as if to touch me. Horrified, I stumble back and nearly land in the water. When I've recovered, I see that he's clapped the hand over his own eyes.

"You don't have to fight me all the time," he says and lowers his hand again. "You're only making it harder on yourself. Nothing's going to change about your situation, so you might as well try to get along with me."

I turn back to the waterfall and bite my cheek until I taste blood, pushing his words aside and concentrating on what I see.

The rock wall towers into the heavens, a grey mountain fringed by trees that get smaller toward the top. It's got to be several stories high, but it's angled, and the stone is full of deep ridges—an expert climber could probably climb up there. For a beginner it would be difficult, very difficult, maybe even impossible, but I'd be desperate enough to try.

What's at the top? A forest path, maybe? I glance down at my own shackled wrist, and then over at Brendan, who's regarding me with narrowed eyes.

"Forget it," he says in a frosty tone, seeming to guess what I'm imagining: myself, hanging on that wall. "The water makes the rock smooth and slippery. You'd fall and break your neck."

"I can think of worse fates," I murmur in a flat voice.

"Then I guess I'd better not tempt you!" Demonstratively, he lifts his shackled wrist to eye level. "But if you ever want to come here without me, I can always chain you to a tree." With that, he yanks me away harder than necessary. Maybe I ruined the peacefulness of the place for him.

He leads me alongside the lakeshore, where the water has carved a small creek bed through the forest. There are even a few lush broad-leaved trees here. But Brendan takes another route, pulling me straight through the dense woods. It's demoralizing. It takes us at least fifteen minutes to walk maybe a quarter of a mile. The spruce limbs extend nearly to the ground. blocking my view. I keep having to duck or push heavy tree branches aside; after a minute or two, I'm sticky with resin. We clamber over dead tree trunks poking out from amid the ferns and brush like deer antlers. My calves start burning after brushing against something that looks very much like an oversized stinging nettle.

I get the sense that Brendan isn't doing this to show me how beautiful this area is—he just wants to demonstrate that I'm not getting out of here on my own.

After a while, I simply stop dead in my tracks. He doesn't notice until the chain jerks him back.

"What's wrong?" There's still an icy edge to his voice.

"I want to go back." There's a spruce tree between us, its trunk covered in pale green lichen that looks like fat ocean coral in the patchy sunlight.

"I was going to build the trap first." As he rounds the tree, the chain catches on a branch. He tears it free, cursing.

"Can't you bring me back and then build the trap?"

"No. You're coming with me." With that, he simply drags me onward.

He finally stops after a few minutes. "Here's the animal crossing," he says, gesturing vaguely behind himself. "The creek can't be far from here. Perfect place to set traps." He takes a blue scarf from his pocket and knots it around a tree limb at eye level. "So we'll find the traps later."

After that, he stamps a little further through the underbrush, brutally hauling me along with him, and glances around. Eventually, he pulls a thick, arm-length tree limb from a tangle of dead wood. "Long enough," he murmurs to himself. He reaches for his belt and unclicks something he'd had tucked underneath his shirt. A rope. It's rolled up, but it turns out to be several meters long. More than enough to tie me to a tree. I suppress the mental image and watch him cut the rope in half with his hunting knife After that, he ties the tree limb to two tree trunks, near ground level. The knots he uses are strangely complicated, crossed over and over in ways I can't follow. Finally, he sticks several smaller, forked twigs into the ground underneath the construction, using them as supports.

"Just need the snare now," he muses before plucking a bag out of another pocket, then reaching into it and withdrawing some wire. He creates a loop and twists the ends. He's obviously done this hundreds of times. I'm not sure why, but I picture him building traps like these for me. To keep me from running off.

Brendan uses his fingers to measure the distance between the horizontal tree limb and the ground, and then attaches the wire so that it dangles down. "We'll have to check these several times a day. If the snare is too big, the rabbit's paw will catch in it, and it will take hours for it to die. A painful death."

I glance at the hunting knife, which is hanging on his belt again, beside the key to my handcuffs.

"I want to go back," I say softly. His agility at building deadly traps with knives, rope, and wire snares is chilling. He truly does have the heart of a hunter. "I don't want to watch a rabbit get caught in that," I add.

Brendan taps the wire snare with the tip of his toe, and it swings easily back and forth. "I'm going to set three or four more traps, and then I'll bring you back. You don't have to join me when I check them."

That evening, there's a dead rabbit hanging head-first from a spruce branch not far from our campfire. Brendan puts one snare around

each of its hind legs to hold it in place while it bleeds out through the slash in its throat. He catches the blood in a bowl—because of the wolves and the bears, he says, and then suggests using it to make soup. He laughs at the look of disgust on my face before taking the bowl to the lake to pour it out.

He leaves me chained to the camper when he goes. This time, he uses two chains hooked together, so that it's long enough to reach the camping chairs by the fire.

When Brendan returns, he pulls out his hunting knife and skins the rabbit. I look away, grimacing, and go back to staring into the flames.

Later, I watch Brendan attack the cooked legs like a voracious wolf. I can't bring myself to touch the meat. I don't think I can eat anything, even though I promised I would.

He brings me a plate of buttered toast with cheese and lemon cookies, but I'm pretty sure I'll throw up if I take a single bite.

When he finishes eating, he looks over and sees that my toast and cookies are still untouched. He rises to his feet, cursing loudly, and fires a rabbit bone into the flames as he stalks into the RV. A few minutes later, he emerges again, mellow and self-satisfied, almost like a businessman who's just made an especially great deal.

He's holding a folder under one arm, and he brings it over to his camping chair with him, where he sits down in a deliberately casual way.

"These are the newspaper articles I told you about," he says, but without opening the folder. It sits flat across his thighs. "The ones from after you disappeared."

I suppress a noise of astonishment. He never mentioned the articles again, so I've been assuming he was making up what he said about having collected them.

"You didn't believe I really had them."

"No," I say tonelessly. I want to jump to my feet and yank the folder away, but I stay right where I am, frozen in place, incapable of moving.

"There are pictures of your brothers in the paper." His eyes glisten in the dancing flames like dark torches. "One of them looks a

lot like you. Avery, I think."

I swallow hard. *Avery…* Rage wells up inside me. I hate it when he talks about them as if he knows them.

"Eat today and I'll let you read the first article. And then you can have the next one tomorrow... if you eat three meals."

My heart is beating so loud that I'm afraid he can hear it. I have to have those articles! Now that he's offering them, which means they really do exist, I'm not about to let this chance slip away again. I have to see the pictures of my brothers! I know they're going to break my heart and that afterwards I'll wish I hadn't ever laid eyes on them—just like this morning when I discovered the supplies—but I don't care, it doesn't matter, I think I would probably walk across hot coals to get those articles. All I want is a few words about my family, an excerpt from the reality that seems centuries away. I would never have guessed that I'd be so desperate for a few seconds of happiness that I'd take them despite knowing my soul would bleed from my body afterward.

"Blackmailing me with those articles isn't fair," I say, trying to hide how excited I am. And probably failing. Jay and Ethan always said I was bad at hiding my feelings. I have too many of them. A deluge of emotions, Ethan called me. My eyes are glued to the folder. "You know how important they are to me."

"I'm not expecting a whole lot in return," I hear him say in a gruff voice. "Not even a smile."

"It's still blackmail."

"I'm not a good person, I told you. Hell, I kidnapped you—blackmail is nothing by comparison."

I start eating. No, wolfing. I'm gulping down the food so fast that Brendan holds me back.

"If you puke everything up again, it doesn't count." There's concern in his eyes. I guess it's possible that he's genuinely worried about my health, but it's still underhanded of him.

I stuff a lemon cookie into my mouth whole and swallow huge chunks of it one after another, until one piece goes down the wrong way and Brendan jumps up to slap my back.

"Choking doesn't count, either," he says almost gently once I've recovered.

There's a weird pressure in my stomach. Furtively, I cover it with my hand.

Brendan opens the folder. "Do you want the first article I have?"

I nod, and he holds out a folded sheet of paper. I reach for it, but he doesn't let go right away. "I don't have the very first article," he says. "I was too busy with you, with keeping you unconscious. This is the second one."

"Doesn't matter," I whisper. *Give it to me already!*

He releases the page with an admonishing look in his eyes. "Don't forget, you have to earn the others, too." With that, he saunters back to the camper, folder in hand, and switches on the outside lighting.

I'm glad he's letting me be alone for this. My hands shake as I smooth the newspaper page open.

TEENAGER STILL MISSING

The all-caps headline jumps out at me. A picture of me fills the entire top half of the page. My heart seizes up. It's the picture Avery took of me last summer, standing beside the apple tree that Liam always does yoga under. They've zoomed in on the picture so it's just my face, smiling cheerfully into the camera, and part of the neckline of my coral-colored blouse. My cheeks are glowing nearly as red as the apple hanging from the branch beside me. My long, blonde hair is mussed from the wind; my eyes are as clear and blue as the sky.

I look happy. Happy, young, and vivacious. Anyone who saw this photo would be shocked to read of my disappearance. That's how it always is: when people disappear, they use the best pictures of them, as if the editors are trying to emphasize the life and joy that's been lost. It's the same with milk cartons—they never show kids sulking.

I stare at the picture, incapable of reading the text. There's a flutter inside me, an indistinct feeling of recognition. A suspicion. I can't quite grab hold of it. Sinister shadows emerge from the darkness. There's something there, whispering softly. Part of me wants to reach out for it, feel my way to it...

No, I have to read this article. Brendan could come out any second and take it back. I hastily shoo the feeling off, but I sense that it merely steps away, like an uninvited guest that won't be denied entry for long.

Tensely, I begin reading.

Sequoia National Park, California
The search for sixteen-year-old Louisa Scriver continues. Yesterday, a large contingent of police officers, fire and rescue personnel, and volunteers searched the area around Lodgepole Campground in Sequoia National Park, but failed to uncover any new leads.

The teenager was first reported missing three days ago. Park officials say Louisa was last seen on the evening of June 25th, when she purchased two Solarez camping lanterns at the Lodgepole Campground Visitors' Center. Park rangers have not ruled out the possibility that she lost her way in the dark, and is now alone in the wilderness somewhere.

According to Sequoia Park Ranger Thomas Baker, cases like these are not unheard of, though the missing person is usually found unharmed within forty-eight hours. With every hour that goes by, he says, the likelihood of the teen having suffered some sort of accident increases. Baker worries that the cliffs and rock ledges in the area around Moro Rock would pose a particular safety risk in the darkness.

The article reads like a report about someone else. Factual, distant. Is this really about me? I take a deep breath before reading on.

One of the girl's brothers, however, insists that she could not possibly have gotten lost. Jayden Scriver says he followed his sister to the visitors' center, and that she knew her way back—especially considering that only a single gravel road leads from there to the tent area.

The teen's brother went on to lament the police's handling of the situation, saying it was "scandalous" that the search did not begin immediately. According to Mr. Scriver, the police instead "wasted precious hours" focusing their attention on outsiders who heard the girl arguing loudly with her brothers that evening, saying that she wanted to go home.

Police Spokeswoman Carmina Loper tells the Daily News that "every option is still on the table," including the possibility of Louisa having fallen victim to a crime.
"We're investigating in several directions at once," she says, "but of course we're still hoping that Miss Scriver simply ran off and will show up at her family's doorstep in a day or two, healthy and happy." In fact, police still consider that scenario the most likely of all.

After that, the article describes the clothing I was wearing that day, and gives a phone number for people to call if they have any information regarding my disappearance.

I read the story over and over again. My head is one big swirling mass of chaos. Half-dazed, I study the pictures at the end of the article. There's a travel brochure-style photo of the entrance to the Lodgepole Visitors' Center. Beside that is a huge picture of Moro Rock and the surrounding area. *Park rangers wonder if this beautiful rock formation may have spelled disaster for young Louisa*, the caption underneath reads.

I read the part about Jayden several times. He doesn't believe I got lost or ran away. And if he's so sure about that, he and the others will do everything in their power to make sure that the police don't quit searching for me. The thought gives me a faint glimmer of

hope, but it dies again right away when I remember what Brendan said earlier: *The police have better things to do than run around looking for a rebellious little teenage girl.*

Unlike me, he's already read every one of these. So they probably really have given up on me. I don't even know today's date. I was kidnapped on June 25th—it must be nearly mid-July by now.

I look at the picture of me again: my radiant eyes, my open smile, the coral blouse I'm also wearing now. That terrible feeling of recognition washes over me again, a wave of darkness that threatens to drown me. I posted this picture on Facebook, visible to the entire world because I thought I looked pretty in it. Especially my eyes and my windswept hair. Ethan kept telling me I should change the privacy settings to "friends only," but I always ignored him. Because I felt trapped in Ash Springs. Because I wanted the world to see me. Because I thought that, if the world saw me, my life would have meaning. I may have even thought that I would only truly start living at that moment—once I meant something to the rest of the world, I mean.

That miserable feeling cuts deeper. I posted so many videos and photos of myself. They all start flashing past in my mind, image upon image of summer, sunshine, color, laughter.

Me and Elizabeth eating ice cream, sitting back-to-back in the dandelion meadow, me wearing the pastel-yellow blouse Ethan gave me, my lips smeared with matching lemon sherbet. Me and Ava arm-in-arm in our new crocheted-hem H&M shorts, making duck-lipped faces into the camera. I see the white blouse I was wearing in that one, the way it slipped down to reveal my tan shoulders. Another image flickers past: Madison and me, Rollerblading on the Road to Nowhere near my house, both of us holding cake pops, me wearing the pink ruffled top and the dark-blue capri jeans. A picture of my feet in the bright-yellow Chucks; another in my pink-flowered sandals. Me and Emma lying on the veranda, heads touching, eyes closed dreamily, a package of lemon cookies between us. A picture of a radiant blue sky with a huge, bright sun. A picture of my favorite food: garlic spaghetti with pine nuts, tomatoes, and fresh

basil. Me in front of the bathroom mirror, with the blue hand soap beside the sink, still in its package.

I know you.

I clutch my throat, gasping for air, when I realize what that means.

CHAPTER 12

I checked out a lot of girls, but I never planned on kidnapping one. Until I discovered you.

Brendan found me online. He must have been watching me for months, every post, every picture, every video. That's the only way he could have known to get these clothes.

Hot rage bubbles within me, until my entire body is shaking. It's partly at him, partly at myself. I clamber to my feet and circle the camping chair like a stalking predator, clutching the article tightly in my fist. I wish I could choke Brendan out with this chain, wrap it tight around his neck until I hear him wheezing the way that poor bunny in the trap probably did. I made everything so easy for Brendan. I even posted our entire route before Ethan froze my account. At the time, I thought it was cool—if I had to disappear from the Internet and the world, I wanted everyone to know where I was. Plus it was a small victory over Ethan.

All Brendan had to do was wait around at the park. He had plenty of time to sit back and weave his trap. If he hadn't succeeded that day, he probably would have done it some other day.

But now I'm done for. Hardly anyone thinks anything seriously bad has happened to me, and no one will ever suspect I'm in Canada. They can search the campground a hundred times with dogs and sticks and whatever else, and I'll go right on being a missing person. They won't officially close my case, but others will

start taking priority, and the police will stash my file away somewhere.

In all these weeks, the reality of my situation has never been so painfully clear as it is now. I'm so miserable it's making me light-headed.

It's exactly the way Brendan described it. I'm lying in a glass coffin, and I know I'll never get out, never. I'll never see any of my brothers ever again. No matter how often I throw myself against the glass, knowing that my life is right there on the other side, I'll never break through. And every time I try, the pain will be worse, the heartbreak will be harder to take. Each time will hurt more. I'm only exhausting myself with this futile hope.

How long can I keep doing this? When will I stop trying to break the glass? When will I finally lie still because my body and soul are failing, my strength is gone?

I stare at the crumpled page in my hand. My cheeks are wet, and my shoulders are shaking. I won't tell Brendan what I found out today. I just don't have it in me. I'd end up bawling and begging and pleading, trying to make him change his mind.

With a strangled noise, I toss the newspaper article into the flames, watch the fire char my face and consume everything that's left of me.

I'm not going to throw myself against the glass any longer.

Days and days and days go by. Each one is ten weeks long. I spend most of my time sitting on the bed in the camper or near the fire, staring into space. In the beginning, whenever I happen to get some time alone, I keep going through the cabinets and drawers over and over. But I don't find anything that might help me defend myself against Brendan, and everything I *do* find only makes me feel more hopeless. He's got everything organized perfectly.

In the meantime, even he seems to have figured out that he can't cheer me up.

I break each day down into individual actions, because it's the only way to get through them. Get up, shower, get dressed, watch

Hero of the Week, wait, eat, wait, eat.

Brendan gives me another article each evening, but I don't read any of them. I fold them into squares and put them in the closet underneath my clothes, because Brendan doesn't want them back. The temptation to look at them is huge, but my willpower is stronger. I can't allow myself to hope anymore.

When Brendan asks me a question, I answer. I've stopped talking to myself, stopped repeating my brothers' names. And I don't look at or touch the charms on my pendant anymore. I pretend I'm someone else, watching my life from outside. This horror is happening to someone else, not to me. I'm not that girl in the forest.

Brendan's making an effort, but he's the whole reason I'm suffering. I can't smile at him, can't waste words on him. I don't want to feel anything, I just want to be. To exist one day at a time. I wish I were like the wind, so that I could simply blow away without taking anything with me. I want to dissolve into nothingness, but I don't want it to be painful.

Sometimes Brendan sits down next to me and doesn't say anything. I get the sense he's trying to share part of my burden. Once in a while, he'll try to start a conversation, but I always shut him down, and after a few minutes he leaves me alone again.

I'm vaguely aware of what he does during the day. He's still building traps, and he often returns with dead rabbits. Sometimes he goes out picking raspberries or cranberries, and not long ago he returned from the woods with a bowl full of blueberries. That alone leads me to believe that his supply of fresh and frozen fruit is starting to run low. He takes our clothes to the creek to wash them every few days, and hangs them up to dry on a clothesline he's strung between two trees. He hangs his heavy cargo pants and jeans over separate tree limbs, because otherwise he wouldn't have enough clothesline for the rest. And he leaves quite often to fetch canisters of water from the lake, which he uses to refill the RV's water tank. Once in a while, he empties the water tanks. Grey water and black water. The black water is the toilet water—he didn't have to explain that, I smelled it for myself.

Recently, he's taken to starting the camper a few times a day and running the motor. He says it keeps the battery from discharging. From what I understand, he needs the battery for the generator, plus he's always putting in different CDs and cranking them loud to scare the bears away.

My days are defined by his activities. Of what he does or doesn't do. He's stopped forcing me to join him anywhere; he just makes sure I keep eating and drinking.

Yesterday, he said, "It would be better if you cried again to get your grief out of your system."

Only then do I realize that the last time I shed a tear was as I was burning the first article. I simply don't allow myself to do it anymore, though my throat is constantly raw from the tears trapped inside it. Even at night, when Brendan is fast asleep and can't hear me, I still swallow the grief over and over again until it's locked away in the pit of my stomach again. Because I know that the next time I cry, I'll never be able to stop.

This morning, I realize that the nature around me has changed, though I couldn't say exactly how.

Maybe the needles on the trees are darker. Or the birds are singing a little more brightly. Or more butterflies and bees are fluttering around the tall willow herb.

It's still early in the morning, the air is cold and clear, and I'm sitting near the faintly glimmering remnants of last night's fire. Besides eating, the only other thing Brendan insists I do is get at least two hours of fresh air.

He disappeared into the woods a while ago to check his traps, so he left me chained to the camper. I've taken to wearing scarves around my wrists so that my skin isn't constantly infected from the metal rings.

I'm scratching at an oozing scab when I hear a loud crack in the underbrush behind me.

"Lou!" It's Brendan. He's coming through the trees from the direction of the lake, returning much sooner than I expected. "You

have to see this!” His voice nearly cracks. He breaks through the brambles full of dark berries and stumbles clumsily toward the campfire. Only then do I notice that he’s holding something in his arms. It’s not a rabbit, though—he always carries those hanging head-first, and not without a certain look of pride on his face.

Mystified, I stand up. It isn’t like him to tromp around so loudly and excitedly—normally he moves as silently as the forest itself.

My gaze shifts to the tiny little something in his arms. It’s a grey bundle, and now it lets out a high, pitiful whine. I stare as though hypnotized at the tiny ears, the adorable paws that seem oversized.

“Here, take it!” Without waiting for an answer, Brendan holds out the bundle, and I clumsily accept.

“Wolf pup,” Brendan explains as he strides back toward the camper. “I found him near a cave.”

I feel the short, wooly fur under my fingers and involuntarily hold the pup a bit closer. Something’s happening inside me, but I’m not sure what.

“I heard him whining.” Brendan opens the rear hatch and disappears halfway into the belly of the camper.

I trot after him, making sure to tread softly so I won’t scare the pup. “You didn’t steal him away from his mother, did you?”

Brendan glances over his shoulder and makes a face at me like I’ve just accused him of wanting to roast the pup over an open fire. “Of course not! Who do you think I am?” He turns back to the hatch. I stand to one side, listening to him rummage around. “Come on,” he mutters to himself. “I know I brought you...” Clattering sounds. “I figure his mom rejected him. Or she died, and the other pups were eaten. Any number of possibilities...”

“Poor thing,” I whisper, cuddling the pup. He’s still for a second, but then his wet nose burrows into the crook of my elbow, and his front paws start moving rhythmically against my forearm. The pup has me all mixed up. It’s like he’s melting a layer of the ice surrounding me. “I think he’s hungry,” I say, uncertain.

“What do you think I’m doing here?” Brendan growls from inside the storage hatch. “I’m trying to find the powdered milk. I’m positive I brought some, in case we ran out of canned.”

"You brought powdered milk?" I don't know why that surprises me.

"Of course." Brendan emerges with a triumphant smile, clutching a blue package. "Got it." He glances at the ball of fur in my arms. "I hope he drinks this. If not, I'll have to drown him."

"What?" My eyes widen in horror.

"So he won't suffer, I mean."

"You're insane," I snap, not even caring whether my tone makes him mad. "That is completely out of the question."

"Lou, be reasonable. If he doesn't drink any milk, he'll starve, he'll die a miserable, painful death. Is that what you want?"

I take a few steps back, stroking the pup softly. "He'll drink it," I say quietly, but with determination. "I know he will."

Brendan disappears into the camper, carrying the package of powdered milk. My chain and I go in after him.

"Can he come in?"

Brendan looks surprised—maybe he didn't realize I was following him. He regards me for a second, holding a tea kettle in one hand. Then he smiles. "Sure, why not?" He fills the kettle from a plastic bottle. "It doesn't matter whether he's outside or inside. The other animals will smell him either way."

Cautiously, I climb the stairs into the camper and ease myself onto the bench, holding the wolf pup under one arm. He's taken his face out of the crook of my elbow now—apparently he's figured out there's no milk in there. Now he's trembling all over, and he starts whining miserably again. *Where did everyone go?* I imagine him saying. *I'm hungry and thirsty, and it's really cold and lonely here without that thick fur to snuggle up to.*

Still cradling the little wolf, I stand up and angle Brendan's dark-blue fleece pullover down from the driver's cab loft he sleeps in. Then I sit down again and wrap the pullover around the wolf, sliding my hand inside so he can feel my body heat.

"We have to weigh him so we can monitor whether he's growing." Brendan turns on the stove, and small blue tongues of flame spring to life beneath the kettle. It smells like gas, even though Ethan always says gas doesn't have a smell. Brendan pokes

through several drawers before finally holding up a box of plastic sandwich baggies. He takes one out. “This’ll be our milk bottle.”

“That? How?”

“I’ll cut off one corner, and he can suckle milk out of it like a teat.” He measures spoonfuls of powdered milk into a measuring cup. “The first domesticated wolves were nursed by human women, did you know?” He smirks at me. “I doubt that would work with you, though.” Mockery flashes in his eyes.

I swallow a sharp retort.

Brendan retrieves a flat kitchen scale from one of the bottom cupboards and sets it on the table. “Go on, put him on there before we feed him.”

I lift the pup out of the pullover and carefully set him on the scale. Seeing him lying there helplessly on the steel plate, I realize for the first time just how small and scrawny he really is. His short fur is grey with a streak of cognac brown, sticking out from his body on all sides. His ears are tiny, and his little eyes are barely open.

“Hurry, he’s getting cold,” I say, wishing I could scoop the pup into my arms again.

Brendan pushes a button. “Seventeen and a half ounces,” he mutters grimly. “Way too scrawny. Wolf puppies normally weigh that when they’re first born, and this one must be three or four weeks old.”

“How can you tell?” Without asking permission, I pick the pup up and wrap him in the fleece pullover, so that only his head is sticking out.

“His eyes are open, so he’s more than two weeks old. Plus he reacts to sounds. Watch.” Brendan makes a throaty noise that sounds a lot like a wolf howl. Immediately, the small animal on my lap starts whining. “See? They don’t start doing that for at least three weeks.”

“You’re scaring him,” I protest, twisting to one side protectively.

Brendan laughs. “This guy? Nah.” He turns away again, because the kettle’s whistling. The whining gets louder. It’s like the pup is putting all of his strength into calling for help. Maybe he thinks the kettle is his mother.

Brendan takes the kettle from the stove and prepares the milk in the measuring cup. “Believe it or not, there are people and animals in the world that aren’t scared of me.”

I scritch the tiny wolf’s soft fur, and his whining gets quieter, but doesn’t stop entirely. “Don’t worry,” I murmur, “you’ll get your food in a minute.” He has to drink, he has to. “Do you think he’ll tolerate the milk?” I ask Brendan.

“Hopefully. The first question is whether he’ll drink it at all. He’s pretty weak.” A shadow flickers on his face, so briefly that I wonder if I just imagined it. “Sometimes wolf mothers bury their young. Actually, though, they only do that when they think the pup is dead.”

“Maybe she was about to bury him but something startled her.”

Brendan shrugged. “Maybe. Or else the mother wanted to move to a new den.” He adds cool water to the mixture, pours the milk from the cup into the plastic bag, and knots it at the top. “Hold this for a second.” He hands me the bag and removes a key from the carabiner on his belt, which he uses to open the cabinet above the side door, so far overhead that I’d have to climb on the counter to reach it... which would be a real challenge with the chain, so it’s one of the few cupboards and cabinets I haven’t tried to search.

Curious, I peer over Brendan’s shoulder and spot a couple of brown bottles along with an arsenal of tools. Is that where he stashes the knockout drops? Or anything else that would help me keep him in check so I can run? My heart starts beating faster. I haven’t thought about escape for so long, or rather I’ve been assuming it’d be impossible because he never makes mistakes. But maybe I can manage to break that cabinet open. Yeah, right, I’m sure he wouldn’t notice a thing like that! I force myself to suppress that faint glimmer of hope, that tiny spark dancing around within me... but the more I try to squelch it, the stronger it gets. Suddenly I remember that one of the cartons in the storage space was marked *Hunting*. Maybe he has more weapons in there?

I’m so lost in thought that it takes me a moment to realize Brendan’s looking at me. His eyes are full of shadows, dark and unfathomable, like the depths of the ocean. He knows I saw those

bottles, plus he's holding a pair of scissors now, which I assume he also got from the cupboard.

"Give me the bag," he says, but the look on his face says something else entirely. *Don't you dare even think about it*.

My fingers tremble as I hand him the milk and watch him bore a tiny hole in one corner. He sets the scissors on the table and pinches the opening closed. "That should do it," he murmurs. He gives me a questioning glance, though his expression is still darker than usual. "Do you want to feed him?"

I look from Brendan to the whimpering ball of fur and then back again. "Can I?"

"Why not?" He smiles briefly, as though trying to drive the shadow out of his soul, but he doesn't quite succeed. "If you're doing that, you can't exactly run away, can you?" The flatness of his tone gives me chills.

"No," I mumble, taking the bag with both hands—and then I'm not sure what to do, because I need one hand to hold the corner closed.

"Want help?" Without waiting for a response, Brendan sits down beside me. It's the first time he's done that, and instinctively, I scoot away. He acts like he doesn't notice. "Put the open corner to his mouth and drip the milk onto his upper lip. A few drops should be enough."

I put the bag to his tiny, still mewling muzzle and release the opening. Milk drips out. Brendan quickly reaches for the pup's head and turns it, so that the milk flows onto his upper lip from the side. Immediately, I feel tiny paws moving against the pullover, and the whining gives way to sucking motions so hectic that the milk ends up dripping all over his face.

"Try this." Brendan flips the pup onto his belly. "Hold the bag at an angle."

I lift the baggie again. The little wolf is frantic with excitement. He suckles and suckles, and when he realizes he's really, actually getting food, he starts to calm down.

"His heart's racing," Brendan says quietly, as though he doesn't want to disturb the pup. "But he's doing well."

“Yeah.” I can’t take my eyes off the tiny animal.

“You’re smiling. For the first time.”

The corners of my mouth sink as though he’s caught me doing something I shouldn’t.

Again, Brendan pretends not to notice. “You should give him a name,” he suggests. He’s still sitting next to me, holding the pup to help him drink.

“No.” I avoid his gaze and squeeze the bag gently to help the milk flow. “I can’t name him if I know you might drown him.”

“That’s exactly why you should name him.” He sounds like he genuinely means it.

“Why?”

“You want him to die without having a name?”

“Names just make it harder. Names bind you to things. Names give them meaning.”

“If he doesn’t have a name, that means he isn’t important.”

The remark gives me pause. Somehow it doesn’t seem like something Brendan the Kidnapper would say. I watch the pup suckle on the baggie, propped upright in Brendan’s grip.

“Maybe not necessarily ‘Princess,’” Brendan adds.

“So he’s a ‘he’ for sure?”

Brendan nods.

The bag is nearly empty now, and the pup’s eyes fall shut. In slow motion, Brendan puts him back into the pullover, and I tuck him in.

“How do you know so much about wolves?” I ask, even though I don’t actually want to talk to him.

“I spent a few summers out in the wilderness. Some of it I read, but a lot of things you can only learn from experience.”

I probably don’t want to know what drives a person to start living all alone out in nature. It probably has to do with his past. “Do you think he’ll make it?” I ask instead. At that exact moment, the little wolf starts retching.

“Dammit.” Brendan picks him up so he won’t choke. “Hopefully he doesn’t have roundworms.”

The pup spits up the milk with a wheezing cough. It spills over Brendan's hands and drips onto the floor. He's a pitiful sight, hanging there in Brendan's grasp, lethargic and limp, closer to death than life.

"I think there's probably no point." Brendan pets the wolf pup's head. "He's already too weak to keep milk down."

"Maybe we gave him too much," I protest. "He just can't drink that much at once."

Brendan shakes his head, pressing his lips. "Sorry. I don't think this little guy's going to live."

"You're not giving him a chance!" Tears suddenly spring to my eyes. "You don't even want to try!"

"I just don't want him to suffer."

"But *I'm* suffering, and you don't care about that. You haven't drowned *me* in the lake yet."

Brendan flinches; his eyes darken. "That's different," he snarls at me furiously.

"No, it isn't. Give him a chance! Please!" My lips are trembling. I don't know why I'm so desperate for the little wolf to make it. Maybe because then I won't be so alone. Because I'll have someone to talk to, even if he doesn't understand me.

"Lou..." Brendan regards me attentively for a moment, and then looks down at the tiny, miserable bundle.

"Please, let's just try! I'll feed him every hour if I have to. A few drops each time. He can sleep in my bed, and I'll carry him around and keep him warm."

"Maybe I should get sick one of these days, too..." Brendan puts in dryly and then hoists the pup to eye level. "What do you think, big fella?"

"Bren! Please!"

He sighs deeply. "Okay. We'll try it for one day. But if he's not doing any better after that, I'm going to put him out of his misery."

"Three days!" I counter. "One isn't enough."

Brendan puts the pup into my arms again and washes his hands. "Two. And you give him a name."

I scratch the pup's ears. "Grey," I blurt out.

Brendan turns and raises an eyebrow. “Grey? Why Grey?”

I lean in and bury my nose in the pup’s fine, fluffy fur. “It’s the name of a story my brother wrote for me.” I don’t know why I’m revealing that information to Brendan. It seems wrong to tell him even more about me, when he already knows so much about my life. At the same time, though, it feels like I’m filling a need I didn’t know I had until now. Maybe I’m building a bridge out of my loneliness. From me to him via Grey. Or maybe I’m telling him as a way of thanking him for giving Grey two days instead of just one.

When I look up, I find my eyes meeting Brendan’s again.

“Jayden?” he asks quietly.

Of course he knows which of my brothers writes stories. I must have mentioned it in a Facebook post, or else he found it out for himself by spying on my brothers. If he went that far.

I merely nod.

“Okay, Grey it is,” Brendan declares. Then he explains how to prepare the milk. Only water from the plastic bottles, he warns me, because the tap water is chlorinated.

“I’ll start keeping the propane on all the time,” he says. “I’ve been turning it off whenever I leave you here by yourself.”

“Why?” Grey falls asleep again, nestled against my hand. I hope he kept down a little of the milk.

“In case there was a gas leak, or there was a problem with the stove. If the gas got out, it would be dangerous in here... and for everything around the camper, of course. I didn’t want to risk you getting hurt.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

Brendan looks at Grey, and his eyes fill with something I can’t quite identify. Longing? Sadness? A specific memory? As usual, when he starts talking, the feeling is gone again. He never allows himself to show his other face. “If you really want to feed him every hour, you’ll have to use the stove,” he says. “Which means I can’t turn off the gas.” He points to a small, white box at the base of one of the kitchen cupboards. “That’s a propane gas detector. Gas is heavier than air, which is why it’s not on the ceiling like a smoke detector. If

there's a gas leak, it'll go off, and then you have to get out of the camper immediately."

I lift my shackled wrist demonstratively. "I'm not going to get far."

"I suppose I can stop putting out traps for the next couple days. And if we save water, I won't have to keep fetching more."

"Or you could leave the chains off for two days, right?" I force myself to smile. It's like biting into a lemon. Sour and painful, as if my own muscles are trying to go on strike.

"So you can run away again the first chance you get, and put yourself in danger?" He shakes his head firmly. "No, thanks."

"You'll just have to trust me. The way I trust you to not hurt me." *Dammit, Lou, smile!*

"My trust is earned. I don't just give it out." He leans casually against the counter, but his expression remains hard.

"Then give me a chance to prove myself. No chains for two days." I tilt my head, trying to remember how cute I thought he was back at the visitors' center, and to look at him the way I did then. "How else are you going to find out whether I'm trustworthy?"

Nothing about his expression changes. "You're not fighting fair. And you know it."

"What's fair, anyway?" I hate the way my voice is cracking. This conversation is wearing me out more than I expected, even though it's just words, just a bunch of plain old words strung together.

Brendan turns away and opens a cupboard above the sink, mumbling to himself the way he always does when he's searching for something specific. After a while, he reaches into the back corner, which I hadn't managed to get at, and pulls out a couple of small bells.

"What are you going to do with those?" I arch an eyebrow. "Tie them around my neck like a dog?"

Brendan's face remains stiff. "Something like that." He leans toward the cupboard again and withdraws a pack of cable ties. "The bells will tell me where you are at all times, so you can walk around outside—they'll keep you safe from bears. I was planning on doing it this way from the beginning, but you were more difficult than I expected..." A thin smile plays on his lips.

I briefly picture myself punching him square in the face, but I manage to make myself calm down. “So you’re going to put the bells on me and then I don’t have to wear the chain?”

He nods. “We’ll try it this way for the next two days. Not at night, obviously.”

“What if I have to feed Grey at night?”

“While I’m awake, that’s no problem. Otherwise I can chain you in the kitchen.”

“Good idea,” I say a shade too cheerily, and get a cynical smile in response.

Even so, it’s still a victory. My first victory. And his first mistake.

CHAPTER 13

I pour some lukewarm milk into a sandwich bag and tie it at the top. It's well after midnight... maybe four or five in the morning, I don't know. I'm starting to realize how short the nights are in Canada—the sun doesn't properly set until almost ten, and it rises again maybe five hours later. A half-moon peeks out overhead between the treetops, pale in the thin strip of visible sky, which is already beginning to turn a soft orange. Luckily tonight isn't as cold as most nights, because Brendan's got the side door and all the windows wide open, probably to air out the stench of wolf and puke. Now the whole camper smells like rosin and spruce needles. It sort of reminds me of the sage ointment Jayden and I had to use when we had coughs.

Baggie in hand, I walk back to my bed. I've built a little hollow for Grey, with a towel underneath him and the blanket rolled up in a ring around him, like an igloo without a roof. Whenever he's awake, he whimpers so pitifully that I wish I could keep him snuggled against my body so he'll know he isn't alone... but I can't, because I need both hands to get these milk baggies ready for him.

He needs to gain weight. I know it's selfish, but I want him to stay here with me. It's the thing I want second-most in the world. After my freedom.

Carefully, I hold the baggie to his mouth, and he starts suckling immediately. I let him have a bit more this time—I started him on

ten gulps, and I'm increasing it gradually. So far, he's kept everything down.

My arms jingle as I squeeze the milk through the tiny opening for Grey. Brendan threaded some small bells onto cable ties, like pearls on a string, and then put one cable tie around each of my wrists, so I sound like a court jester every time I move. It's still nice to be free of the chains, though. Now that Brendan's taken them off, I can truly appreciate how obnoxious they were. Now I don't have to watch out to make sure I don't trip on them or get caught on stuff. Not to mention the whole constant, burning awareness of being chained up, of being a prisoner.

Grey keeps suckling on the empty bag, kicking against the blanket with his tiny paws, maybe hoping it will stimulate the flow of more milk. He's so small. Carefully, I unroll the blanket and lie down next to him, nestling my head against his so that he can feel my hair. When I was little and my dad was still alive, I found a kitten underneath some sagebrush, probably barely two months old, and somehow I managed to convince Dad to let me keep it. Every night when I went to bed, the kitten would snuggle in by my hair and purr, probably because my hair reminded it of its mother's fur. If Brendan hadn't cut my hair, I'd be able to cover Grey in it now.

I draw him closer and cover him gently with my hand, scritching his thin pelt. "It's okay, Grey," I whisper in the most comforting tone I can manage. "I'll make sure he doesn't drown you. He wants you to make it too, I know it. Even if he doesn't say so."

Grey doesn't start whimpering again. Maybe he's fallen asleep.

I allow myself to shut my eyes for a minute, too. The egg timer Brendan gave me is going to go off in an hour, and then I'll have to do the whole thing again, put the kettle back on and mix some more milk. I turn over what I just said about Brendan in my mind. Deep down, I think I genuinely believe it. *Good people do good things*, he said earlier. He found Grey and brought him home. He could have simply left Grey in the wilderness, knowing some other animal would eventually eat him, but he brought him here. Either to raise him, or to put him out of his misery. I think he probably would have done the same thing if he'd been out here alone. He just does what he

thinks he needs to do. He didn't cut my hair to be cruel; he did it because he was trying to make me less afraid. Although I'm not all that convinced by the argument that a guy wouldn't chop off a girl's hair if he was planning on having his way with her, I do buy that he was doing it as more of a symbolic gesture. Weirdly, it didn't even make me mad when he did it, because I *did* buy his explanation—and I actually *was* less afraid afterward. As much as I hate to, I have to admit that not everything he does is completely terrible.

Grey burrows his head deeper into my hair, and his tiny muzzle nudges my ear.

"It's okay, Grey, I'm here," I whisper, and the bells jingle as I adjust my hand. Grey's breathing is even, and he seems to be keeping the milk down again this time. He's going to pull through.

I keep my eyes closed, but I can't sleep. A whiff of cigarette smoke wafts in through the open window, along with the sound of the campfire crackling. Every once in a while, I hear Brendan put another log on. I listen closely for the howling wolves we've heard on so many other nights, but tonight they're silent. I wonder whether Grey's mother was part of that pack, or if her pack was just her and her mate and Grey's siblings, which is what Brendan thinks. I feel Grey's warmth against my ear and cheek, and for the first time in weeks, I don't feel quite so alone. I even manage to doze off, and when the timer goes off, I startle upright.

"You can sleep a while longer," I hear Brendan say. "I'll put the kettle on." I blink sleepily at him and then at Grey, who's awake because I moved and is turning his little head back and forth, searching for me. Immediately, I lie down beside him again and snuggle my hair against his head.

"Tomorrow, I'll cut up a bedsheet and make a sling so you can carry him like a baby," Brendan says. When I hear the words "cut up," I remember the scissors in the overhead cabinet.

I nod, but inside, I make myself a promise: I'm going to nurse Grey back to health and pretend like I'm coming to terms with this whole situation. Grey will even help me with that, because I actually do feel better when he's around. And while I'm taking care of Grey, I'm going to work out a new escape plan, a super well-thought-out

one that will work. I just have to get Brendan to stop putting the chains on me. For good, I mean. I can't run right away, of course; I have to wait it out, to make him trust me more and more.

I pet Grey softly. "But first you have to live," I murmur quietly to him.

When Grey's two-day reprieve is up, Brendan takes the scale out of the kitchen cupboard. I'm so anxious I accidentally bite the inside of my own cheek.

"Put him on," Brendan orders, his expression perfectly neutral. His lips are thin and hard, his eyes impossible to read.

My hands shake as I place the bundle of fur that will someday be a wolf onto the tray. Grey drank plenty of milk, but he had some mild diarrhea, too. Now I'm afraid he's lost too much water, or that he'll stop keeping the milk down.

"You need to let go of him, Louisa."

It's so hard to take my hands away. I feel like I'm abandoning Grey when he needs me.

Brendan pushes the button on the side of the scale. His eyebrows drift upward, and I detect a hint of a smile on his face. "He's gained eight ounces," he says, sounding relieved. "That's really good."

"It is?" I ask in a trembling voice. I'm not letting myself get my hopes up. Apparently, I'm getting to be a real pro at that, because now I genuinely can't believe I'm hearing good news.

Brendan nods, and I see the rigid mask fall away from his face.

"So you're not going to drown him?" I reach for Grey, but Brendan gets there first, picks him up, and puts him in my arms.

"No. I think he's turned a corner. Now all we can do is hope he keeps gaining." His eyes shift from me to Grey. "You should probably go on feeding him frequently for a few more days. Every two hours, maybe. I'll help if you want—I can do part of the night shift."

I blink, sleepy but relieved. I've barely slept in two days, and I'm only now realizing how much my bones ache. "Sounds good," I say, forcing myself to keep my tone breezy. "It'd be great to get a few hours of sleep in a row again."

Brendan regards me quizzically—surprised by the ease in my voice, maybe. "Okay, I'll take the second half of the night, then."

Should I mention the chain? Is it too soon to ask for that? Will he get suspicious? Maybe I should be patient about that.

"Do you want to eat outside with me tonight?" Brendan asks as he puts the scale back in the bottom cupboard. "We could drink to Grey's will to live." He straightens up and turns his gaze to me.

My stomach does a flip-flop, and I feel the blood draining from my face. Maybe hearing me use a friendly tone of voice makes him think he's going to get lucky. Or is he expecting gratitude because of Grey?

"Hey, Lou." He pulls on a too-long strand of my hair—not hard, but not gently, either. "It's just eating and drinking a toast. Maybe laughing a little. That's all."

"Eating and toasting," I echo, forcing myself to concentrate on not clutching Grey too tightly. "Okay. If you promise not to put anything in my drink."

Brendan's expression darkens immediately. "I thought we were past that."

"And I thought you weren't going to touch me," I say in a tight voice.

He holds up his hands in a placating gesture, palms out. "Sorry, I was just joking. And it was only your hair."

"Bad joke."

"I agree. I shouldn't have provoked you."

We lapse into silence for a while.

"So what do you think about this evening?" Brendan asks, sounding for all the world like a boy trying to get a date.

"Only if you don't put the chain on me," I blurt out before I can stop myself. "Um, I mean... because it's been two days, and... you said two days..." So much for patience. I'll have to do better than this when it comes to my escape plan.

Brendan shrugs almost nonchalantly. "I was planning to start leaving them off during the day anyway. At least while Grey's going to need to be fed. After that, we'll see."

CHAPTER 14

I'm pretty much only focused on Grey until afternoon, though that doesn't keep me from asking myself a few basic questions. What supplies will I need in order to escape into the wilderness, and how do I collect them without Brendan noticing? I wish I could sit down and make a list, but I'm afraid Brendan would find it. Maybe I could put it in my closet, tuck it in among the newspaper articles. Brendan's never looked in there. Why would he? On the other hand, do I know for sure that he doesn't check up on me? He may have rummaged through there while I was in the bathroom or something. Then I have another idea: I could carry the list around with me, since he's promised not to touch me.

I peek outside through the open side door. Brendan's not far from the camper, gathering tinder for the fire. He prefers dry birch bark when he can find it, but there's nothing in this area but spruce, pine, and a couple of larches. I doubt he's about to go down to the lakeshore and leave me here by myself for that long.

I look down at Grey, who just finished some milk and is slumbering peacefully in the "baby sling" Brendan fashioned from an old sheet. Moving as cautiously as I can, I open one of the kitchen drawers. Plastic forks, knives, and spoons that Brendan washes and reuses, plus a couple of dull butter knives and a can opener that's not particularly sharp. No pens, no pencils. I'm pretty sure I've already gone through every drawer in here and haven't found

anything usable, but this is also the first time I've gone looking for a pen. I open the next drawer: sandwich baggies, trash bags, spices, kitchen rags. I hesitate. Brendan probably doesn't count the sandwich bags, and I'm going to have to keep my escape supplies somewhere. But where do I put the bag? Under the mattress? But what if Grey pees on it again and Brendan wants to re-make it?

I pull out a baggie, close the drawer, and stuff the baggie into the wardrobe underneath the newspaper articles. My fingers brush the dry paper. I'll need to make the list somewhere. As if on autopilot, I slide the bottom article out from the pile. I folded it so that the article itself is on the inside. Carefully, very carefully, I tear a small strip off the edge. It'll have to do. I can only take a few essentials with me, just what I'll need to survive in the wilderness. And what I absolutely cannot do is think about all the things that could go wrong. I don't have any idea where I am. I'm not even sure how many miles it is back to the main road Brendan turned off from. Plus, I've never been alone in the forest. If I get lost, I'll probably freeze to death or die of thirst or... No, if I start seriously thinking about potential what-ifs, I'll lose my nerve.

I fold the scrap of paper and stick it into my jeans pocket. Then I stand at the wardrobe uncertainly, still holding the rest of the article. I don't know why, but something forces me to unfold the page. Ethan stares back at me. *STILL MISSING*, it reads underneath in giant letters, and beneath that, *Louisa's brother holding out hope.*

I don't bother with the article itself—I just stare at Ethan's face. His heartbreakingly thin face, his sunken cheeks, the dark rings under his reddened eyes. He's lost at least twenty pounds. His skin looks as thin as vellum that might tear the next time he moves. And he looks like he'll never be able to laugh again, never crack another smile.

Tears blur my vision, and I'm almost glad of it. Ethan looks so haggard—almost like worrying about me is literally eating him up inside. Like it's too much for him to handle. Like life is too much for him.

That's when, for the first time ever, I really and truly understand how much he's already been through in life. First he lost Mom, then

Dad. No wonder he was always so strict and hardly let me do anything: losing both of them made him vulnerable. He was terrified of losing someone else he loved. And then, out of nowhere, that nightmare became a reality. And from what I know of Ethan, he'll even blame himself. He insisted that I come camping with them. It's probably tearing him apart, thinking about how nothing would have happened to me if he'd just let me go to modeling camp with Ava and Madison instead. But he doesn't know how obsessed Brendan is with me. Brendan would have gotten me anywhere.

I tenderly run my hand over his printed face. All the horrible things I said to him about Mom and Dad seem a thousand times worse to me now. God, I must have hurt him so much.

"I'm coming back to you," I whisper hoarsely, blinking the tears away. "You're not going to lose me. I promise. I'll find a way back to you."

I fold the newspaper clipping without reading it and stick it back underneath the folded stack of pants. Then I stand on the bed, still cradling Grey in the sling, and forage through the overhead cabinet where Brendan put the "girl stuff." I'm pretty sure I saw tampons and pads and even makeup in there, the one time that I went through that cabinet. I've never used any of it, though—I didn't get my period this month, probably thanks to the stress, and makeup was pretty much the last thing on my mind. But now I rummage through the toiletries: pink and yellow nail polish, extra bottles of orange-blossom shower gel, blonde shampoo. Finally, I find some sky-blue eyeliner, brand-new, nice and sharp. I stick it in my pants pocket along with the bit of paper, and then carry Grey down from the bed with me.

I take a quick peek through the window. Brendan's still traipsing along the tree line with a bucket. I pull out the eyeliner and the thin paper strip again, and use the wall as a writing surface—carefully, so I won't smush Grey between my body and the wall. I write down everything that comes to mind:

Lighter
Birch bark
Water - bottle?
Food - cookies?
Warm clothes
Rain protection
Hiking boots/wear
Scissors/knife
Rope

I pause. There's no way I'll be able to hide all of that from Brendan. I'll have to have the warm clothes and the boots on already. I won't be able to carry a bunch of water bottles, either, so I should probably bring one empty bottle and refill it from the creek... or put creek water in a sandwich baggie, like we do with Grey. That would be the best. But is that water drinkable? I need to find out. And how do I know I'll keep finding water along the way? The rough forest road runs in a different direction than the water—but then again, I can't keep going parallel to the road anyway, because that's the direction Brendan will expect I've gone. He'll probably be driving up and down that road looking for me. So wouldn't following the water make more sense? It has to lead somewhere, and then I'm not just wandering aimlessly. That's probably the best plan.

I peek outside again. I don't see Brendan anymore—and I hear him walking directly beside the camper. Hastily, I tuck the eyeliner and the paper away.

"Hey, Lou," Brendan calls inside. "What do you want to eat tonight?"

I don't care, I'm about to say, but catch myself in time. "Spaghetti with tomatoes and pine nuts," I call out loudly. My heart's pounding in my throat. Please, God, let him not have seen me! How would he have, though?

"*Excuse* me?" My response seems to have surprised Brendan so much that now he's coming up the stairs into the RV. I hope I wasn't laying it on too thick. "Did I miss something?" He's in the hallway, peering back at me? Fine droplets of sweat gleam on his forehead, and the corners of his otherwise-stern mouth are turned up in a smile that actually reaches his eyes.

"I just thought maybe," I mumble, avoiding his intense gaze. "I'm getting sick of grilled stuff."

Brendan laughs. It sounds genuine this time. "Okay. If you help."

By evening, I've fed Grey a bunch more times, and I swear he's bigger than he was this morning. When I tell Brendan that, he merely grins in reply. Only later do I realize why. He probably wasn't smiling about what I said so much as about the fact that I spoke to him on my own initiative.

Later, he goes with me to the lake so that I can wash Grey's baby sling. He peed in it again, and it soaked through the towels I put down inside it. As I wash the cloth carefully, trying to keep the rest of the sling dry, Grey lies on Brendan's lap and watches me with his clear blue eyes. Brendan's sitting on the tree trunk by the shore, scritching Grey's ears. The pup looks perfectly content. He probably thinks we're his parents.

"If he keeps gaining weight, we'll be able to switch him to solid food soon," Brendan says thoughtfully. "Normally, once the pups reach eight to ten weeks, the parents feed them regurgitated meat."

I stop working the soft soap into the cloth and give him a sidelong glance. "If you think I'm going to puke bits of rabbit up for Grey, you've got another think coming," I say. "But you go right on ahead."

"Maybe I will!" Brendan takes a pack of cigarettes out of the breast pocket of his black linen shirt. The top two buttons are undone, revealing his smooth, tanned skin and a hint of his collarbone. Somehow everything about him is perfect, if there's such a thing as dark perfection. He regards me, squinting. Here in the pale daylight, between the trees and the water shimmering in the sun, his eyes glisten with that deep intensity, that strange mixture of

strength and vulnerability, the way they did at the visitors' center. My stomach tenses up.

What if he hadn't kidnapped me? What if he'd just invited me out for a drink and then brought me home to my brothers?

His eyes never leave my face as he sticks a cigarette into his mouth with one elegant motion and then removes his lighter from his pants pocket—carefully, so he won't startle Grey.

I need that, I realize, and that thought drives the others from my mind. The lighter is the first and most important item on my escape list. Brendan is always talking about how essential fire is in the wilderness, even though we have the camper to protect us while we sleep. Not long after we got here, he told me about a group of hikers that got hopelessly lost in this part of Canada. One night, their fire died for some inexplicable reason, and they all froze to death.

At first, I thought Brendan was only trying to scare me, but now I believe he was telling the truth. We must be awfully far north, based on how early the sun rises and how late it sets. It has something to do with the Arctic Circle, if I remember my geography lessons correctly.

I gaze at the lighter as though hypnotized. "What are you going to do when you run out of cigarettes?" I blurt out. "Or lighter fluid?"

Brendan's face twists into that strange smile again. "I can also start a fire with two rocks, don't worry. But I brought plenty of extra lighter fluid, too. And as far as the cigarettes go..."

I can't meet his eyes any longer. I turn my attention back to the cloth in my hands.

"Don't you mean, 'When will you need to go to a grocery store?'"

I hear the lighter flare up, and the first cloud of cigarette smoke envelops me. "The smoke isn't good for Grey," I say in what I hope is a disparaging tone.

"He's not going to get lung cancer," Brendan replies dryly. "Wolves don't live that long."

I dunk the soapy cloth into the lake and swish it around. Maybe I should keep the conversation on the grocery store—at least then he won't start wondering if I'm planning to run off through the

wilderness. Whatever I do, I have to make sure he doesn't suspect I might try to escape again. At any rate, now I know that he usually carries his lighter in his pants pocket, and that he makes sure it doesn't run out of fluid. I might be able to steal it while he's asleep. It shouldn't be a problem if my chain is long enough. And if he notices it's missing, he might assume he just dropped it somewhere. Maybe.

"So when will you need to go to a grocery store?" I ask casually, looking over at him. If this escape plan doesn't work out, that will be my next best chance.

Brendan takes what seems like an extra-long drag on his cigarette. "Never, if I put my mind to it."

"What?"

He must see the horror written all over my face, because his eyes turn another shade darker. "We have meat and wild herbs. Spruce needles for tea... raspberries, blueberries, rosehips... And not far from here, there's a wild meadow with edible berries you've probably never even heard of. In the winter, we won't need a freezer for the meat, because it'll be cold enough outside. And you can even eat the bast layer of some trees—that's the moist layer between the wood and the bark. Did you know that?"

Nope, but thanks for the tip, in case I'm ever in danger of starving while I'm running away from you!

"But what about toilet paper, soap, and pads?" I ask weakly.

"You can substitute cloth and natural products. People haven't always lived in this much luxury, you know."

"And water?"

Brendan points toward the lake. "Freshwater. There's plenty of it around here."

I keep my eyes on the cloth as I wring it out. "So you mean we can drink from the creek and stuff?"

"I've done it."

"We won't get sick?"

"There could be bacteria in it, but if it makes you feel better, we can boil it first. And I brought tons of disinfection tabs."

"Oh? I hadn't noticed." I go on wringing out the cloth. My stomach is twisting in knots. He's so perfect. And I'm so naive and confused about my escape plan.

I don't think Brendan senses how nervous I am. "We haven't had to use them yet. I still have gallons and gallons of water in the storage hatch."

I stand up, knot the sling, and slip it on again, arranging it so that the wet spot is against my back, between my shoulder blades. "Can I have Grey?"

Brendan stands as well, holding a cigarette in one hand and the wolf in the other. Grey hangs there in his hands, a helpless little bundle of life. "Sure."

I carefully transfer Grey back into the sling. He wriggles around, which is a good sign—he was mostly apathetic before. Eventually, he lands on his back with his short legs waving in the air clumsily. I flip him onto his stomach so he'll be comfortable, and then gather up my courage, preparing for what I'm about to say.

"I know where you found me." My voice is firm, and this time I hold his gaze.

Something like insecurity flickers on his face, but only for a moment, and then his usual superiority returns in full force. "Did you figure it out from the photos in the newspaper?"

I nod.

"Good." His tone is almost admiring, and for the first time he looks at me like I'm an equal, or at least like I'm someone he needs to take seriously, instead of just the cute, colorful butterfly flapping around helplessly in a cage, dependent on his kindness.

"I don't want to talk about that," I say. I don't even want to think about how he stalked me, how maybe he was looking at my pictures and touching himself, thinking about how my body would feel underneath his. I don't want any deep insights into his sick thought processes. But there's one thing I do need to know.

"How long did you spend preparing to kidnap me? When did you decide that you were really going to do it?" I'm amazed that my voice is steady. Maybe I'll understand him a little better once I know when and how he decided to kidnap me. If I want to get away from

him, I have to know what makes him tick. It suddenly strikes me that I've barely given that any thought before, and it might be the key to my escape.

He regards me for a long time, seemingly trying to decide how to respond. "I wanted to have you. All to myself. Forever. Once I made up my mind about that, I started preparing. I estimated how much of everything I need for an average summer in the wilderness. And then I multiplied that by... a number you wouldn't like. And I added in everything girls need, plus what we'll need in winter. I'll probably realize over the next few months that there's something missing—but if I had to go pick it up after the fact, it wouldn't be the end of the world."

"And when did you decide to kidnap me?" His single-minded focus is starting to unnerve me after all.

"You suddenly disappeared from the Internet. It was like you'd left me. I couldn't allow that."

"My brother made me deactivate my Facebook account." As I say it, I suddenly understand what he meant weeks ago*. So I don't lose you again.* "You wouldn't have kidnapped me if you'd kept on seeing me on Facebook?" I wrap my hands around the outside of the sling to cradle the wolf-bundle.

Brendan takes a step toward me, and all at once, there's something threatening about him again. There's something in him that I don't understand, something dark. The thing that emerged the night of the thunderstorm. And I probably need to figure it out if I'm going to have a chance against him. Right now, though, it just terrifies me. I scoot away; twigs brush against my cheeks, and suddenly I feel a tree trunk at my back. My heart is racing.

"D-don't come any closer, please," I stammer in a thin voice.

He stops immediately, even steps back a few feet. Sunlight gleams on his dark hair. His expression softens so much that I can barely believe it's still Brendan. "I wouldn't put it quite that way," he says to answer my question. "I got the idea long before that, for a totally different reason."

"What... reason?" My voice is shaking.

"I'm obviously not going to tell you now, when you're already practically hyperventilating." He nods toward the camper. "We should go back and make dinner. If you still want to, I mean."

I lift Grey up inside the sling and press him close. "Yeah," I whisper. *But I don't want to, I have to.*

The walk back to the camper is unusually quiet. After a minute, I realize that only one of the many bells on my wrist is jingling. As Brendan pushes his way in front of me, I take a closer look at the cable-tie bracelet. The bells are full of water, and apparently it's keeping them from making noise. I can barely believe my luck. Now I know that I can not only drink the creek water, I can use it to escape silently. Discreetly, I release Grey and shake my arms a little at a time, so that the water will gradually run out of the bells before Brendan notices they're stopped up.

As Brendan puts the pasta water on to boil and I chop sun-dried tomatoes, my fear fades again, mostly because I'm keeping busy. Grey is crawling around in his pullover "nest" beside me, sniffing at the fleece. He's getting more animated by the hour. Every time I look at him, I have to smile. Brendan has noticed, too, and now he seems a lot more approachable.

"We still have to toast the pine nuts," he says.

"You want me to get them?" I ask in what I hope is a casual tone. I know they're underneath the camper.

Brendan raises an eyebrow suspiciously. "They're in a box in the storage hatch, right in front. The box says Kitchen 5 on it."

"Okay." I don't sound breathless, do I?

Brendan unhooks a key from his carabiner and hands it over as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

Without another word, I walk down the stairs and around the side of the camper. Past the *Travel America* logo. What if I just ran away now? It's late, the sun's already going down, the trees are like grey watchmen. I could dunk my wrist bells in the lake again and hide in the forest until Brendan comes out of his flashback. He'd go searching for me, but as soon as he left the area, I could come back

and grab everything I needed, and then leave in a different direction.

It takes an inhuman amount of willpower to make myself unlock the rear hatch on the RV. *Not yet, Lou,* I tell myself as I open it. *Anyway, you're wearing flip-flops, how far do you think you'd get? Plus he might be watching you...*

I peer inside, reading the carton labels in the dim light. The one that says "Hunting" catches my eye immediately. It's near the back, all the way to the right, so I'd have to climb inside partway to get at it. On second thought, I've gotten more than enough new information for one day. Better not push my luck. This could be Brendan's way of testing me.

I open the box directly in front of me, which is labeled "Kitchen 5." Brendan must have reorganized everything in here, because the pine nuts were in a box near the back before. I know that because I remember the exact moment that he said he didn't have any fresh basil, but he had jars of garlic and pine nuts.

I discover gigantic quantities of flour, sugar, nuts, almonds, and trail mix. The smaller packets of pine nuts tumble around in between them. Where did Brendan get the money to buy all these supplies? What did he do for a living? Was he in college? Or did he pay for it with the money he won in that fight, the one where he killed his opponent? But he said that was three years ago. I haven't even been on Facebook that long. He must just have happened to have the money, then—he didn't go out and specifically earn it so that he could kidnap me.

I fish two packets of pine nuts from the box, close the hatch, and lock it.

When I turn to go, Brendan's face is right there, pale and ghostly in the semi-darkness.

"Took a while," he says quietly.

"I poked around in the box a little." I lift the pine nuts up demonstratively and then hand him the key. Hopefully he can't see how much I'm shaking.

"I just wanted to make sure you found the right box."

I walk past him, unbelievably relieved that I didn't try to run. I'm going to have to bide my time, get him to trust me more first.

We eat in silence—in the camper this time, because of all the black flies outside. Now I'm watching Brendan layer wood for the campfire and distribute tinder. I even help him for a few minutes, and once the first tongues of flame are flickering upward, he goes inside and returns with two beers.

He puts a can in my hand without asking, and then drops into his camping chair. I fed Grey before dinner. He fidgeted around in my lap as Brendan and I ate, but now he's asleep underneath a woolen blanket on my camping chair. Carefully, very carefully, I lift both blanket and furball, sit down in the chair, and settle Grey and the blanket across my lap.

Once I've opened the can, I slide my hand under the blanket and rest it on Grey. It's comforting. To him and me both.

"He does you good," Brendan says after a while. "Grey, I mean. You smile more often now."

I take a big gulp of beer. It tastes awful, dry and bitter, but I need the alcohol to loosen up. Ava and Madison and I have snuck a few hard lemonades or Lime-a-Ritas here and there, but I'm kind of a lightweight, so I have to make sure I only drink enough to relax, to work on getting him to trust me.

"He makes me feel less alone," I admit, sipping my beer. It's the truth.

"I can understand that." Brendan nods, and his face takes on that weird mysterious expression again. "I had a dog once. His name was Blackie."

"I guess he was black, then." I know it's a lame joke.

Brendan shakes his head. "He was a retriever mix, he was every color but black."

"So you were always kinda different, hm?" Even this small amount of alcohol is enough to make me bolder.

"How do you mean?" he asks, keeping his expression perfectly neutral.

I take another drink of beer, avoiding his eyes. "Um, I dunno, other people would have named him Goldie or Brownie or whatever. And other people would have asked me on a date, instead of kidnapping me... I assume you know I wouldn't have said no, right?"

"I wanted more than a date, though." His voice is gentle. I can almost hear him smiling.

But I don't want to live with you, I think, wishing I could say it aloud. If I want to find out more about him, though, I'll have to figure out who he is. My heart beats a shade faster as I ask my next question. "Why are you so afraid of being abandoned? How come you get flashbacks just from the thought of losing someone?"

Brendan stares at me, and I immediately regret asking. Maybe this is where he completely flips out and attacks me. *I'll kill you…* But he lowers his eyes, and his hands tense around the can. His hands that are capable of such terrible strength, it's like they've never known what tenderness is.

"I can't talk about it," he replies after a while, quietly but firmly.

A wave of something close to sympathy washes through me. I hate myself for it. For God's sake, he kidnapped me, I'm not about to start trying to see things from his point of view. "You can't, or you won't?" I ask.

His eyes are fixed on the pine needle-strewn ground. The fire crackles in the silence between us; now and then, a log bursts open in the flames with a loud crack-pop.

"Sometimes it's good to talk about things," I hear myself say. "It helps me a lot."

"I can't," he whispers, so quietly that at first I'm not sure if I imagined it. But then he speaks again, slightly louder this time. "I've tried so many times." He's still staring at the ground.

"Maybe you should start by just talking to yourself out loud about it," I suggest. "Without anyone else listening."

"Good idea, but it wouldn't work," he says with a smile so anguished, it's as if someone's whipping it out of him. "If I heard myself describing it all, it would be like I was raping myself, breaking every bone in my body, grinding myself into dust and ashes. I'd be nothing afterward."

I swallow. The things he's saying are hitting me hard, deep down where my tears are all waiting to burst out. I suddenly wish someone would come by and give him a hug, because I can't do it myself. Maybe that someone could fix him, and then he'd let me go. Maybe he really isn't such a bad guy, apart from kidnapping me.

I pet Grey, and it occurs to me that maybe Brendan ought to have him on his lap, warming him. The way he's sitting there now, surrounded by dark spruces, pale in the glow of the firelight, clutching the beer in his shaking hands, it's like there's a chill inside him that no warmth from outside could ever drive away. Like only an inner warmth could fill the emptiness at his core.

"When you say you'd be nothing..." I start cautiously, as though the words might literally break him. "Who... who are you now, Brendan?"

He lifts his head. "Someone who knows his strengths and weaknesses."

"So what are your strengths?" I think of Jayden. "If you could only name three, which would they be?"

"Determination, self-control, strength," he replies without hesitation.

"And your weaknesses?"

"The opposites of those."

I ponder. "So… indecision, helplessness, weakness?"

He nods.

"I don't think you know how my brothers described me, because I never posted about it on Facebook." I ignore his cynical smile, which has lost a lot of its usual superiority. "Ethan says I'm superficial, difficult, and don't use my head." I pause for a moment before continuing. "Jayden says I'm vivacious, insecure, and full of emotion. It's all the same, it's the light and shadow sides of the same character traits." I don't know where I'm getting this stuff. It's been locked away somewhere deep inside me.

"Maybe you're right." Brendan's gazing into the fire, the way he does so often. As though it's got the warmth he can't find inside himself. "But the shadows are always stronger than the light. When you turn on a light to drive the shadows away, all you do is feed

them. It's like every glimmer of hope infuriates them... Isn't it weird how the things that are supposed to help you are what make it extra-clear how weak you are?"

I don't think anyone I know has ever been so honest with me, apart from maybe Jay. I'm not sure what to say, but I know I have to respond somehow. "Maybe the shadows aren't stronger," I muse. "Maybe the light just makes them easier to recognize, and what you see in them scares you, so you don't look. But maybe you should."

He smiles again, less anguished this time. More of a mixture of fascination and guilt. "You make it sound so easy. That's exactly why I wanted you, Lou. You're the light. You're like a sun. You were always so radiant in your pictures, like life was easy for you. You made it look like it could be easy for anyone, even for me. It was like you wanted to get everything you could out of life, without worrying about boundaries or limitations. You looked like you only expected the best in life."

I realize I'm more clinging to Grey than petting him. "You got all of that from my Facebook photos?"

"And the stuff you wrote."

"Wow, I really was the perfect victim," I remark bitterly. "I only expected the best of you, too."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to take advantage of how you are... I mean, you're just... extraordinary, that's all."

"Never heard that one before."

"I'm surprised. I mean, you never knew your mom, and you lost your dad when you were young—sorry, yeah, I do know about that." He grins crookedly, as though stalking and kidnapping me is some cute little prank he pulled, but a moment later he's as serious as ever. "Other people would have complained about their terrible fate, having lost both of their parents. They'd have used it as an excuse every time they failed. You didn't, not once."

"I have my brothers. They're my family. I never wanted for anything."

"Yeah, because that's how you see things. Losing your parents never stopped you from jumping into life with both feet. You didn't waste time worrying about what you were missing."

"You're putting me in way too good a light. I wasn't missing anything. I grew up in a house full of love, everyone took care of me. You're wrong about me."

"Nah." He smiles and shakes his head. "I'm not. If there's anyone in the world who loves life, it's you."

I think about how dissatisfied I always was in Ash Springs, how much I hated being invisible to the rest of the world. It's like all of that happened in a different life, in another reality. The way I used to act suddenly strikes me as completely childish.

Even so, Brendan's not entirely wrong. I was never afraid to live, never afraid I might lose anyone. I always assumed the best about things, unlike Ethan who was worried about absolutely everything. Which is probably why I didn't understand him.

"We should stop talking about this for tonight," Brendan says, jolting me back to the present. "This is Grey's big day, right?" He points to my lap.

I nod, glad to change the subject.

"Why don't you tell me the story that you named him after?" Brendan suggests.

"You mean Jayden's story?" I take another large gulp of beer. The can's nearly empty.

He nods. In the bright light of the campfire, his eyes are black, glittering jewels. I've gotten closer to him tonight than ever. I like the idea of telling the story because I'll feel close to Jayden again, but it seems wrong to tell it to Brendan, the person who's keeping me away from my brothers. Then again, he's revealed a lot about himself tonight, if not anything concrete. And there's this faint voice in the back of my mind that says he did it so that I won't be as scared of his shadowy side, because he generally doesn't enjoy talking about himself at all.

"Okay," I finally make myself say before I can change my mind. "The name of the story is *Grey*, but it's about a Native American boy, not a wolf."

Brendan puts a cigarette between his lips and leans back with an expectant look on his face.

"I'm not really a very good storyteller," I add, "but this one I pretty much know by heart."

"I don't remember anyone ever telling me a story, so I don't think I'll notice if you do a good or bad job." He nods to me, and I spend a moment gathering my courage and strength and all the words I'm going to need for Jayden's story. Then I just start talking, picturing myself in the middle of the tale, with its magical scent in the air and its unique melody in my ears—I think that's about how Liam would put it.

"Once upon a time, many summers and winters before the ships of the white man brought death to the area around the Big Muddy River, a small tribe of Lakota lived near the river valley. It had lush forests of tall, white sycamores, thick-trunked oaks, and chestnuts as far as the eye could see. Every clearing was carpeted in red flowers, and in the autumns the trees glowed yellow and red like torches.

"The other Lakota had light-brown skin, but this particular boy was born grey, like, literally totally grey from head to toe. A pale grey, like ashes. His mother named him Delsin, which meant 'he is so.'"

"She didn't call him Grey, even though that's the name of the story?" Brendan breaks in.

I give him an admonishing frown, like a schoolteacher to a student. Blame the beer. "No. She knew that, looking how he did, he would never get a better name, so before the other children could start calling him Dead Skin or Grey Face, she picked Delsin, to show that she accepted him the way the Great Spirit had made him. Young Lakota were allowed to pick a new name for themselves after performing a heroic deed, but she was afraid that would never happen. Even when he was only five, his ashen skin made him seem like an old man. The girls were afraid of him and hid from him, and the boys excluded him and threw stones at him whenever he tried to play with them."

"This is a sad story," Brendan remarks.

I glance at him. He's listening with rapt attention. I realize how lonely he must have been as a child, if this is the first time anyone's ever told him a story. "When Delsin was six years old," I continue,

“his mother died giving birth to his sister, so he had nobody left who loved him.”

This is the first time I realize that Jayden wove part of his own story into this one. His—our—mom died giving birth to me, his sister.

“Delsin’s father, the chief of the tribe, was ashamed of Delsin. He wanted to drown the baby at birth, but the medicine man foretold that it would bring great unhappiness to the tribe if the chief drowned his firstborn son like a deformed dog. But whenever the warriors of an allied tribe came over to plan attacks or negotiate trades, he would say to them, ‘That is not my son. He was sent to us by the Great Spirit, and I must accept this fate and raise him.’ But he never brought Delsin along on hunting or raiding parties, not even when Delsin had become a man and it became time for him to prove himself so that he could find his place in Lakota society. His sister, Alaska—which means ‘where the sea breaks upon the shore’—avoided him as well, because she was afraid that the others would exclude her along with him, and then she would never find a man to take her into his wigwam.

“So Delsin was left by himself, and became a grey shadow that slipped from the village to the forest to the meadow lowlands unseen, like a ghost. His father put one bowl of beans in front of the wigwam for him each day. Delsin only crept inside at night to sleep, and rose long before his father so that he would not taint his sight, as the chief always said.

“Eventually, even Delsin began to believe that he was only a shadow, a grey shadow. Since the Lakota refused to speak to him, he went deep into the forest and began talking to the plants and animals. And the sunny days grew longer and longer, and one evening, he simply didn’t return to the campsite beside the Big Muddy River. He was living by himself, but he was not alone—he spoke to the oaks and the sycamores, to the owls and the deer. He even spoke to the moon and the stars, because he had so much to tell, so many things he had heard and seen among the Lakota, but never understood. Beneath the great night sky, he spread out all of his stories, across the green-grey hilltops on the far side of the woods, and his words rose up and wove into the firmament like

pictures. The moon he called 'yellow friend in the black ocean'; the stars he gave shimmering names that seemed to twinkle in his mouth when he spoke them."

"Like what?" Brendan asks.

"I asked Jayden the same question," I respond with a genuine smile. "He said he knew the names, but he couldn't say them or write them, because they were too beautiful, and if he tried, their letters would shatter like glass. For Delsin, the stars he named were droplets of silver that the Great Spirit had daubed into the sky. And sometimes, in his most secret dreams, he wished his skin was the color of the stars. Silver, rather than grey."

I look at Brendan. "When Jayden first told me this story, I hated him for not telling me the names."

Brendan laughs. A strange feeling creeps over me, and the longer I look at him, the stronger it gets. It's completely out of place here, fluttering like a butterfly under glass. It wants to fly off, but not necessarily to freedom. Whatever the feeling is, it horrifies me so much that I immediately push it back into the furthest recesses of my mind.

"When the animals came to him," I continue, "he gave them names according to their temperament. And after spending many, many winters living among them and talking to them, he suddenly found he could speak their language as well. It must have been an amazing morning for Delsin—imagine how he woke up and realized he understood the whispers in the forest around him! For Delsin, it was as though he'd awakened in a brand-new world. He ate nuts with the squirrels, he sang with the birds and the grasshoppers, he walked with the deer. And deep inside himself, he heard a voice saying, *This is how you are. This is your place.* Here, nobody laughed at him, nobody stared at him. All the animals spoke to him. At night, he listened to the music of the stars, watched his yellow friend the moon, and thanked the Great Spirit for finally giving him a home."

"Is that the end?" Brendan asks when I pause. He's like a kid—his eyes are even shining. I know I shouldn't be, but I'm moved at

how simple little things are enough to make his eyes light up with joy.

I shake my head no. "The story's not over. Like I said, many winters and summers passed."

Brendan leans back again in his chair.

"Delsin could have been happy, but after a while, he started longing for a partner. He wandered back to his tribe's summer campsite, but kept himself hidden in the bushes. It seemed that everyone had forgotten about him completely. Nobody mentioned him, nobody used his name. His father and sister happily went about their day.

"Head hanging, he snuck back toward the forest, but then he came to the small stream, a tributary of the Big Muddy River. Several girls were there, fetching buckets of fresh water. Delsin froze as if he'd been turned to stone. He spent several days hiding in the bushes, but none of them noticed him. One of them was especially beautiful. She always came later than the others, but stayed longer. Her name was Istu, which meant sugar. Everything about her was sweet, from her small, full mouth to her smooth, black hair to her perfectly formed breasts that looked like they would fit right into Delsin's hands. After spending several days almost in a trance, he returned to the forest. He forgot the moon and the stars and the animals, and he wished he was not Delsin, more than he had ever wished for anything. He wished he were different, wished he had a name that was worthy of Istu. But he knew with every fiber of his being that that day would never come. He withdrew into the forest, grieving for something he would never have, and became very angry with the Great Spirit. The animals came to comfort him, but he sent them away in a rage. He told the moon they were no longer friends, and then he was all alone again. A grey, lonely shadow, just like before.

"But one cold morning, the call of an owl roused him. The owl was screeching about a massive army of warriors coming from the north, preparing to attack the Lakota. When Delsin heard that, his heart was filled with terror. He thought of Istu's sweet lips and her soft breasts. He hurried off, and a pair of does followed him, telling

him about the enemy's plans, which they had heard during the night. The enemy tribe was going to surround the village, and then raze it to the ground in a single, terrible strike. They were going to steal the food the tribe had stocked for the winter, and they were only going to leave the unmarried girls alive.

"When Delsin heard that, he was furious, and he ran even faster. He traveled for three days and three nights. When he reached his old village, none of the others believed his story. They circled around him, shoving him and laughing at him. His father's friend, Istu's father, even proposed killing him, believing that Delsin had returned to bring a curse upon their people. He suggested that perhaps Delsin himself had revealed their location to the enemy out of revenge, because they had shut him out. But his daughter, Istu, stepped in front of Delsin and protected him from her father with outstretched arms.

"In that moment, Delsin knew that Istu's name was about more than just her sweet lips. She managed to persuade the Lakota to listen to Delsin. His father, the chief, demanded that he prove he could talk to animals, so Delsin spoke to a lame horse, and discovered that it was limping because it had stepped on a stone and developed an infected sore on its hoof—but the stone was too small to be visible from the outside.

"The Lakota were astounded. Delsin demonstrated his talent several more times, and the tribe was filled with respect, because none of them had ever learned to converse with animals. They began to set traps for the enemy, and brought their winter stock elsewhere to keep it safe. The women and children were brought to a neighboring tribe, whose young, able-bodied fighters joined the Lakota's own warriors. And thus the enemy arrived to find the village empty—and themselves surrounded.

"Not a single Lakota died that day, but the enemy warriors fell. It was a miracle.

"That evening, as the few remaining leaves on the trees glowed even redder than usual in the setting autumn sun, Delsin's father fell to his knees at his son's feet. 'I always denied that you were my son,' he said in a heavy voice. 'And I was right. I am not worthy to

be your father. A man like you comes from the Great Spirit. Today, you saved our tribe. Without you, our people would have perished.' When he said that, the rest of the tribe sank to their knees as well, and bowed their heads.

"'From now on,' Delsin's father said, 'you will no longer be Delsin, Son of the Great Spirit, but Silver. For what is grey? Grey is silver that does not shine. And today you were radiant, Silver. Every person here saw it.'

"Tears sprang to Delsin's eyes, and he was not ashamed of it. He drew his father back to his feet and said loudly, 'My name is Delsin: He Is So. If I were not so, I would never have learned the language of the animals, and you would have perished, don't you see? I could only save you because I am so. My mother chose this name well.'

"And so Delsin kept his name. One month later, he took Istu for his wife beside the shore of the Big Muddy River, which today is called the Missouri. Istu, whose breasts and lips were sweet, but her heart was the sweetest of all."

With that, I end the story. The fire crackles between us, and in the distance I can hear the rushing waterfall. The pack of wolves we heard the first evening howls somewhere deep in the forest, so far away that it's only a notion of a sound.

Jayden said once that every story should leave behind a stillness, a moment of contemplation. Maybe that's what makes us both fall silent. Grey, on the other hand, suddenly springs to life on my lap underneath the blanket. He sniffs my hand and starts licking it like he's expecting milk to come out.

"Nothing in there, Grey," I say and giggle because his nose is tickling my fingers.

"You can stay there with him, I'll get the milk." Brendan stands up. He regards me for a moment, the story echoing in his dark eyes like a curtain of dreams. He hesitates.

"What?" I ask.

"Grey is silver that doesn't shine. It's the same, like the light and shadow sides of the same thing. Is that why you told me that story?"

"I told you that story because you wanted to hear it," I reply in astonishment. "If I'd been telling the story in order to make something specific happen, I'd have put in a part about Delsin kidnapping Istu."

"How would the story have ended then?"

Grey's suckling on my thumb, and I can feel his baby teeth, not sharp enough to hurt. "I don't know. That would have depended on Delsin."

Brendan raises an eyebrow, but doesn't reply. Then he takes the beer can from me and goes into the camper. Dishes clatter—he's probably washing them while he waits for the kettle to boil.

Suddenly, a piercing alarm echoes through the forest. It's so loud that I almost fall out of my chair.

"God fucking dammit!" I hear Brendan snap.

"What?" I call. Grey whimpers.

Through the open side door, I see Brendan reach toward the ceiling and shut the alarm off. "Just the smoke alarm!" Brendan laughs in relief. "For a second I thought it was the propane gas alarm."

"What would you have done then?" I ask loud enough that he can hear me. He said something about that once.

"I'd have had to turn the gas off, and you would have had to get yourself somewhere safe."

I sit there for a while, gradually realizing what he just said. *You would have had to get yourself somewhere safe...* what does he mean? "So where is that gas canister? I mean, in case the alarm goes off and you're not there?"

"It's in a compartment on the far side of the camper, about level with the side door. But don't go messing with it, or you might blow us both up."

Now he almost sounds like Ethan! My heart starts beating slightly faster. Not because he thinks I'm inept, but because for the first time, I finally have an idea for how I might be able to escape. Once I realize that it might actually work, I immediately feel completely calm—but there's also a heaviness in my chest, and I'm not sure why. I think about the feeling I got earlier when Brendan laughed. I

try to call it up again, but I've buried it too deep, it's out of reach. Probably just as well. I definitely can't let myself get pangs of conscience over this. He made his bed, he can lie in it. If he hadn't kidnapped me, I wouldn't have to leave him. It's all his fault.

Even so, that butterfly under the glass bell jar keeps circling through my head—and part of me feels completely, totally empty.

Grey wriggles around on my lap, which is a nice distraction.

"You'll have to be there for him when I'm gone," I whisper and lift the blanket a few inches. Grey is still sucking and biting on my finger, kicking the inside of my hand with his little paws as if to say*, I'm hungry, right this second, don't go acting like anything else is more important.*

I have to smile. "Be there for him the way you've been there for me."

CHAPTER 15

More time passes. The moon waxes and then wanes again. During the day, the air gets so hot that the heat shimmers between the trees. Even the chipmunks are only making their appearances in the cool of the morning and the evening, always hoping to snag a few crumbs.

Something's changed between me and Brendan. Not long ago, I started noticing changes in the forest itself, like how the needles on the trees were getting darker and the willow herb was shooting up. But those are just signs that it's midsummer; Nature's got that under control. The changes between me and Brendan are harder to pinpoint. He's still the kidnapper and I'm still the kidnapping victim, obviously. I wear the bell-bracelets during the day, and the handcuffs with the chain at night. The power dynamics around here are as clear as ever. And sometimes I still get scared of his dark side, still panic at the thought of him losing control of the shadow inside him, the way he did that night of the thunderstorm.

But those moments are fewer and further between now. Maybe I'm starting to accept him as he really is: not good, but maybe not pure evil through and through, either.

I've realized I sneak glances at him a lot when I think he won't notice. I look at his slim, sinewy body, at how the belt with the hunting knife fits around his narrow hips, at the pale scar on the back of his left hand, the same side as the leather armband with the

silver coin. The day before yesterday, as we were piling up campfire logs, I finally caught a glimpse of the design on the coin. It's a bird with two different wings: one has normal feathers, the other branches out like a tree. I didn't get a proper look at it, because I didn't want to ask Brendan to show it to me. He wears the armband all the time, so it must be really important to him, like the charms on my pendant are to me. I wear the pendant constantly, even when I sleep or shower, and when it gets in the way during the day, I stick it under my shirt. Maybe Brendan associates the coin with some similarly painful memory. Maybe it has to do with the darkness in him, with his fear of abandonment.

Part of me thinks that I shouldn't care who or what made him into the person he is now, that I should go on hating him as much as I did in the beginning. I'm trying to, but for some reason it's not working anymore. If my escape plan works, I'm not even sure if I'll press charges. If I do, it will probably only be out of fear that he might get his clutches on me again.

But then there's this new, trembling part of me that wishes Brendan hadn't kidnapped me. That things between us had gone how they did with Delsin and Istu. Part of me wants to like him, to trust him... but no, he's my kidnapper, and obviously you have to hate your kidnapper. My escape plan is the only reason for me to have anything to do with him at all. I have to understand him better in order to outfox him.

I don't know why everything is suddenly so confusing. I'm probably letting his emotions influence me more than they should. Maybe I even pity him, as sick as that sounds. The logical part of my brain tells me it's wrong to feel anything but contempt for him, but I still can't quite shake it off. Sometimes I'm glad when I have another reason to be mad at him. Because he refuses to tell me what day it is or where we are, for example. I have no sense of time out here in the wilderness. It's like some kind of parallel universe—time, the forest, Brendan, everything. Like I'm living a life adjacent to real life, and I just have to find the portal to take me back to my old life.

I've started collecting spruce needles to help me keep track of the days. I could kick myself for not starting sooner. I'm dying to

know what day it is, or at least what month. Otherwise I'm afraid I'll completely lose my grip on reality.

Brendan put *Hero of the Week* on a few days ago—reception was better this time—and I listened closely, waiting for them to announce the calendar week. "Ladies and gentlemen, that was Hero of the Week 30," or whatever. That's how David O'Dell always finishes every show. But Brendan shut off the TV before that tall blonde woman had finished talking, so I didn't get to hear that last, crucial sentence.

Later, I asked Brendan what the date was, but all he said was that time wasn't important anymore.

He's right, as far as day-to-day life in the wilderness goes. Every day is pretty much the same as every other. But I can sense how fast time is passing. I see it in the phases of the moon, and in Grey, who's getting bigger every day and now follows us, tumbling and bounding, when we fetch water or wash clothes. And I see it in my hair, too. It's growing steadily, though still not down to my shoulders yet. If hair really grows half an inch per month, it'll be winter before it's shoulder-length again. Brendan says winter lasts six months here, and spring and fall are short. Maybe it's just the approach of fall that's making me so nervous. Wherever we are in Canada, it's far enough north that it gets down near freezing at night. The days are getting shorter; the midday heat takes a long time to develop and then fades quickly, long before twilight.

Which means I don't have much time left to escape.

When I open my eyes this morning, the air is already scented with browning pancakes and fresh coffee. The spot by my head where Grey always sleeps is empty. I sit up and lean to the side, peering out. Brendan's sitting on the bench. He's wearing the hoodie he had on the day he kidnapped me. Same black cargo pants, too. Grey's on his lap, drinking his first helping of milk for the day. He doesn't have to be fed as often anymore, and now Brendan's the one who prepares his morning meals. I sit there quietly for a moment, studying Brendan's face. His dark-brown hair is up in a short

ponytail, and I can tell he's smiling. Faintly. Other people might not even recognize that it's a smile, but I know it is. When I realize how well I already know him, I try to make myself avert my eyes, but I can't. There's something about that smile that makes me sad and happy at the same time. I feel a dark, despairing flutter deep inside me, like some small, winged creature struggling to free itself from a drop of amber.

"Hey!" Brendan lifts his head and looks at me.

I startle, and the fluttering stops, as though the moth has folded its wings. It's still sitting there, though, trapped by something that won't let it out. I rub my face, pretend to be sleepy so Brendan won't notice how confused I am.

Without another word, he tosses me the key to the handcuffs. Every morning, he sets them on the table beside him so that he doesn't have to go through the whole process of unhooking them from his carabiner. He hasn't actually said so, but I think he does it so that I'll be free faster.

I unlock the chain and unwrap the neck scarf around my wrist. As I walk toward the bathroom, I inspect my hands and arms closely so that I won't keep staring at him. The wounds are all healed now; the last of the bruises has faded.

Once I've shut the door behind me, I start doing knee bends, as far down as the tight space will allow. Physical exertion seems to be a good way of driving away what's left of that fluttery feeling.

I feel more life returning to my body with each passing day, and since I'm eating regularly now, I think I'm almost as healthy again as I was before he kidnapped me. But I know I'm not in good enough shape to survive alone in the wilderness for days on end, even though I take every chance I get to move around: I help Brendan with whatever work needs to be done, run around the camper with Grey, and do gymnastics while Brendan's sitting by the campfire in the evening, drawing pictures he doesn't show me.

I decide to do more knee bends than usual today, but I stop at twenty-five so that Brendan won't wonder what's taking so long. If he discovers that I'm exercising, he might draw the right conclusions about why.

Still slightly out of breath, I wash my face with the blue soap, and then study it in the mirror. Still thin, but not as pale anymore. I look older than I did just a few weeks ago. I venture a smile, and it scares me—the face in the mirror is a complete stranger, and the smile looks fake, as fake as Brendan's laugh. Thinking about him makes me think of the feeling I got earlier, and I pluck at a stray strand of hair, suddenly deeply insecure about myself. For the first time, it actually bothers me that my hair is like this, a shock of blonde sticking out in weird directions. I haven't cared one way or another about my appearance, but all at once, I really want to look in the mirror and feel pretty again.

I open the door. "Do you have a pair of scissors I can use?" I call out.

"For what?" Brendan sounds surprised.

"I want to even out my hair."

"Check the closet."

What?

It takes me several seconds to process this new information. My fingers are suddenly quivering in excitement. The last time I looked through the shelves in here was just a few days ago—searching for stuff I might need when I escape, as usual. I grabbed a couple Band-Aids and stuck them in the plastic baggie I've hidden among my clothes. I couldn't quite work up the courage to steal an entire gauze bandage—I'll have to wait on that until a few hours before I'm planning to leave.

Now, when I open the closet, I see the scissors right away, sitting there on the bottom shelf.

As I snip my hair, I wonder whether this means Brendan trusts me now, or whether he's testing me. The urge to hide the scissors under my clothes is overwhelming, but obviously I can't do that. I scoop up the trimmed ends and toss them into the pedal wastebasket, and notice that the sink isn't draining properly. The tank needs to be emptied. Brendan's normally the one to do that, because I was too weak to carry full buckets to the creek. Today, though, I feel like I could do it. Anyway, that would give me a chance to scope out the area surrounding the creek unnoticed.

“The grey-water tank is full,” I tell him immediately as I sit down on the bench with a cup of coffee.

“I know. There’s standing water in the sink, too.” Brendan reaches across the table to pass me Grey, whose little wolf’s tongue immediately runs across my entire face, making me giggle. I set him on my lap.

“Looks good. Your hair, I mean.”

“All I did was trim the ends.” I wait for my shoulders to tense up the way they usually do when he comments on my appearance, but it doesn’t happen. I don’t know what to make of that, but I decide I’d better get back to my original plan rather than dwelling on it. I try to smile, hoping it looks more real than the one I did in the mirror earlier. “Want me to empty the tank later?” It comes out maybe a touch too sugary, and the smile might be overly sweet, too.

A suspicious shadow flickers across Brendan’s face, though it could just be because I’ve never offered before. After hesitating for a long moment, he nods slowly. “I’ll show you which levers to pull.”

“I could carry the buckets to the creek, too. I think I’m strong enough.” I give him an innocent look.

“Alone?”

I shrug like it’s no big deal either way.

“Give them an inch, they take a mile,” he says with a taunting smirk and rises to his feet. “Did you put the scissors back, or are you going to stab me in the neck with them later?”

“I put them back. You can check if you don’t believe me.” The scissors were a test. Of course they were.

One corner of Brendan’s mouth twitches upward. “I will later... if you let me live that long.”

As I eat, he threads the bells onto a new cable tie, the way he does every morning. I can feel him watching me as he does it. I keep glancing up at him, but then looking away just as quickly, like his gaze burns my eyes. There’s that feeling again, the feeling of something inside me trying to break free, like millions of golden moths underneath a bell jar. Their wings are light, so light, but they can’t get out. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me. Cheeks burning, I force myself to keep my eyes on my pancake.

"Done," he says after a few minutes.

Confused as I am, I still extend my wrist automatically—the usual routine—and he pulls the cable tie gently, like he's putting a piece of jewelry on me. When his hand brushes mine, my stomach tenses in shock. Not from the touch itself, but from the faint puff of air that seems to explode on my skin, tingling. I just sit there for a few seconds, so confused I'm almost light-headed. I can't look at him, even though I can tell he's waiting for me to. Instead, I pet Grey, who's still lying in my lap.

"Lou?"

"What?"

"Stop running."

My heart nearly stops. The golden feeling inside me collapses, leaving a strange darkness in its wake. "I'm not trying to escape," I lie, but my voice sounds too squeaky.

A moment later, his hand is underneath my chin, and he's lifting my head, forcing me to look at him. "That's not what I mean," he says, sounding tense.

I'm not sure if I'm relieved or horrified by his answer. His eyes are large and wide, the pupils flooding out over the brown. I stare into them, letting the waves crash over me, giant tsunamis dragging me under. *Do you want this?*

All I'd have to say is *yes* and he would kiss me. Then right and wrong would officially be switched around forever.

My heartbeat is thundering through my head. Hundreds of wings are beating inside me like a sea of fans, but I still don't have enough air to breathe.

"You said you... weren't going to touch me... not like this..." I whisper, sounding frightened. Frightened of my own feelings, not of his.

He withdraws his hand, but I can still feel the pressure of his fingers, the echo of his touch. It was neither gentle nor hard, but my chin is still burning like it's on fire.

I take a deep breath and force myself to keep eating breakfast as though everything is normal, even though every cell in my body is in

chaos. I can't make heads or tails of what I feel or why I feel it or anything. It's one big tangled mess.

But there's one thing I do know: I need to get away from here before whatever this feeling is gets any stronger.

I stay sitting there, clutching Grey in my hands, and I don't start breathing normally again until Brendan goes outside.

I make myself a mental deadline. Three days. I can't wait longer than that. I can do without most of the things on my list. The only thing I definitely need is the lighter. The scissors can take the place of the knife. They're pretty sharp. I've got the Band-Aids, and I can get gauze. I tell myself that I don't *only* need to escape because of Brendan—I mostly need to get going while it's still summer. But deep down, I know that the thing I'm most afraid of is that dark, frantic fluttering inside me. I've never been so terrified of a feeling.

Involuntarily, I clench my fists, though there's nothing specific for me to fight against. A few weeks ago, I'd have punched Brendan in the face if I'd gotten the chance, if I'd been strong enough. Now I've run out of hate. I don't even feel contempt for him. I'm desperately searching for reasons to see him as a monster, but he's just not. When I think about him, all I get is that fluttery butterflies-under-glass sensation. Warm, golden, terrifyingly strong.

Abruptly, my thoughts turn to Ethan, to his haggard face. To him sitting at home worrying day and night. Maybe I really am a bad person, because otherwise I wouldn't feel this way. I'm trembling inside. This time, I'm not going to disappoint Ethan. I'm going to find a way back to him, no matter what it takes.

Half an hour later, I'm freshly showered, and I've changed out of the jogging pants and T-shirt, into the yellow blouse and a pair of jeans. I wrap a thick sweater around my hips just in case, and put on my hiking boots.

When I get outside, Brendan's already kneeling near the side door, in front of the open hatch containing the grey-water and black-water tanks.

He’s all business—nothing about his expression is anything like how he looked at the table earlier—so I pretend it didn’t happen right along with him. I set Grey on the ground between us, feigning nonchalance. Grey immediately begins chewing on Brendan’s boot laces.

“Hey, you!” Brendan nudges him away, but Grey wants to play, so he sinks his teeth into one of Brendan’s cargo pants pockets. Brendan sighs, plucks Grey off, and growls at him. Whimpering, Grey tucks his tail between his legs and jumps over to me.

“We need to start training him,” Brendan says, nodding in the wolf’s direction. “Otherwise, he’ll start thinking he’s the alpha.”

An odd thought, as small as Grey is. “Can we actually keep him?”

Brendan gives me a sharper-than-usual look, and I wonder if it has anything to do with what happened earlier. “Of course, why wouldn’t we?” he says then with a shrug, and sounds perfectly casual. “Wolves act more or less like dogs when they grow up around humans.”

“Won’t he want to go back someday? He can hear the other wolves in the forest, too...”

“It’s a possibility, though I’m not sure whether the pack would accept him. Maybe one day he’ll disappear into the woods and won’t come back.”

I have to force myself not to stare at Brendan constantly. What does he think about what happened earlier? Does he think I have feelings for him? And if so, what did I do that made him think that? Is it the way we’re living together here, the way I’m acting cooperative? How can he know something I’m not even sure about myself? I’m pretty sure the only reason I feel like this is because I’m so lonely. I mean, basically, I just feel sorry for him. I’ve stopped hating him. Maybe I even like him a little bit. And I’m reacting to him this way because he’s the only human being for miles and miles. It’s not unheard of—lots of kidnapping victims fall in love with their kidnappers. I heard that years ago, back in Ash Springs. But I’m not in love with him, not really. It’s pity, I think. Maybe a mix.

I'm so deep in thought that I only catch half of Brendan's explanation, so it startles me when he says, "Okay, go ahead!" and points to the silver pipe, which he's put a bucket underneath.

I blink at the two grey levers at the end of the pipe. Crap. I don't want to admit to Brendan that I missed the most important part because I was too busy brooding over how I feel about him. I'm guessing the grey water has to be emptied more often than the black water, so the lever is further forward because that's the one that gets used more often. As I'm reaching for the lever, Grey leaps in and sinks his tiny teeth into Brendan's pants pocket. Brendan shakes him off, cursing, and accidentally knocks the bucket over just as I pull on the lever.

And then a lot of things happen at once. A dark gurgling noise comes out of the pipe, followed immediately by a horrible stench.

"Fuck!" Brendan shouts, and a second later, brown sludge starts shooting straight at us. It spreads across Brendan's lap, spraying in every direction, and when he tries to leap out of the way, he catapults Grey backwards in a high arc. The wolf whines so pitifully that I can't help jumping in to rescue him from the spray, even though it means taking a direct hit straight to the back. Grimacing, I roll onto my side and set Grey on my stomach. A river of piss, crap, chemical tabs, and who knows what flows past my head, and I have to suppress a wave of nausea. It's worse than the time we had a butyric acid leak in chemistry class. I may puke. Brendan's already started, or at least it looks that way—he's kneeling on the ground a few feet away, spitting something out. Maybe he got that stuff in his mouth. It's so gross I don't want to move a muscle, for fear of spreading the sludge any more. Cautiously, I lift my head and look at Grey. His fur is soaking wet—he's completely covered. It's a pathetic sight. At first he just sits there, like he's not sure what to do with himself. Finally, he settles on doing what he does best, which is whimpering and hoping someone comes to his rescue.

"That was... goddamnit!... the wrong lever," Brendan wheezes after a while, sounding furious.

"Sorry." My whole body seizes up. Is he going to have another one of his attacks now? On top of everything?

Brendan props himself against his hands and curves his back like a cat. "You have poop in your hair," he manages to choke out. "Looks... funny!" Dark-brown sludge is dripping from his head and running down his cheeks. He wipes it away, checks his hand, and then bursts out laughing. He laughs and laughs like this is all the funniest thing in the world. Occasionally, the laughter turns to retching, so the overall effect is a mashup of a coyote howling and a plugged drain.

"You don't even want to know how you look," I retort once he's calmed down. Fat flies are already swarming around us, and the stench is everywhere. I glance over at the pipe, which is barely dripping now.

"Last one to the lake's a rotten egg!" Brendan suddenly cries, scrambling to his feet, and runs off. I stand up and trot after him, clutching Grey. We tear through the trees, stamping on ferns and jumping over roots, and finally scramble past the rotted tree trunk. Brendan leaps straight in without a second thought. He dips underwater for a moment and then emerges, snorting. "Fucking cold!" he exclaims before diving down again.

I set Grey in the ferns near the water's edge and struggle to kick my shoes off. "Be right there!" I promise and start wading slowly into the lake, picking my way across the mixture of sand and gravel at the bottom. It's really not that deep, but better safe than sorry. I can barely even dog-paddle—hell, Grey can probably swim better than I can. I plop into a sitting position, and then get on my hands and knees and slowly sink back. It's viciously cold. I dunk my head into the icy water a few times to rinse the worst of it out of my hair, and then start scrubbing the rest of my body with my hands. After a couple of minutes, my teeth are chattering. When I stand up, my wet clothes are clinging to me, but obviously I have to keep them on. Brendan's ripped his hoodie off, and his shirt is drifting toward the stream, but I barely notice it because I'm too busy being hypnotized by the sight of Brendan's sinewy back. I already knew he had a tattoo, but I'd only ever seen it in the dim light of the camper, and I thought it was a dragon or some other bad-boy thing, but now I see that it's the same design from the silver coin. The bird itself

stretches across one of his shoulders. Its right wing is covered in dark feathers, and the left is made up of white tree limbs that extend over the bird's head as black branches, with fine, dark twigs spreading as far as Brendan's neck, so it's kind of a mix between a wing and a treetop.

Something fascinates me about the tattoo. I don't know if it's the design itself, or the combination of black and white on his smooth skin, or what. The limbs could be roots, I realize. Like a heaven-and-earth thing. My fingers twitch with the desire to touch Brendan, to trace the path of the branches up to his neck.

"Lou? Are you deaf?"

"What?" I shake my head, dazed. Brendan's turned around and is giving me a quizzical stare. What the hell was I just thinking? I must be completely batshit crazy. How can you use your head when you've already lost your mind?

"You can wash Grey back there near the waterfall if you want. There's one spot where the water is a little warmer."

"Oh, okay. Sure!" Still horrified at myself, I trudge back and pick up Grey, who's standing on the flat shore now, dunking his furry head in the water. Holding him as far away from me as possible, I wade over to the waterfall.

Brendan's calling to me, but the waterfall's so loud that I can barely hear him.

He shouts it louder now. "Left! Further left!"

Fine droplets of water spray my face and body as I maneuver through the spray, with Grey hanging limply in my grasp like a smelly, miserable lump. I take another step to the left and feel a warmer current against my calves, so that's where I dunk Grey into the water, just far enough that his head is still poking out. He whimpers and shivers, completely dumbfounded that I would subject him to this torture, mere minutes after he nearly drowned in a puddle of liquid waste. I scrub his small head clean with one hand and then lift him to cuddle him. Before heading back, I give the waterfall beside me a quick once-over. Here, up close, I can see the rock wall behind it. There's at least three or four feet of space between the waterfall and the rock. Freezing mountain water runs

down the stone in steady rivulets, so it's worn completely smooth, like yellowish-brown marble with black pockets here and there.

Then I get an idea. I turn to look at Brendan. He's wading toward the stream, dragging his soaked hoodie behind him. I take another step to the left. There's a niche in the rock wall, barely big enough to hide in, and it's completely invisible from the other side of the rushing waterfall. My heart skips a beat. If I can distract Brendan with a fake propane-gas alarm, he'll want me to get far away from the camper. He'll go around to the back of the camper to turn the gas off, and I'll make a break for the lake and hide here behind the waterfall. Eventually, he'll start wondering if I've run off. Maybe I'll manage to leave a false trail. He'll go looking for me, and then the flashbacks will hit him, and I'll have plenty of time to go back and get everything I need in order to escape.

And then I'll leave.

I get butterflies in my stomach when I realize that it might seriously work. They rise into my chest, the way they did earlier when Brendan was gazing at me so intently.

I look in his direction again. He waves at me with the hoodie and laughs. His eyes are twinkling. He looks happy. Maybe his plan might actually have worked. Maybe I really am his medicine, his light, his sun, whatever it is he's expecting of me.

The butterflies turn into a dead weight that drags my legs down, like I'm wading through cement. The realization that I might be helping him gives me pangs in my chest. Knowing how miserable he'll be when I'm gone makes me feel like a traitor. Like I'm destroying something. Destroying *him*.

Grey starts wriggling and kicking, which brings me back to the here and now. I shake my head energetically. I don't owe Brendan anything. Not a damn thing. And I want to go home. I want to be back with my brothers.

Still... part of me wishes Brendan would come with me.

CHAPTER 16

The clearing Brendan's parked the camper in is an absolute furnace. The shirt I changed into in order to clean up the wastewater pool is sticking to my back, and I'm so thirsty I feel like I've been squeezed like a lemon. After a while, Brendan disappears into the camper and returns with a bottle of water, which we take turns drinking from.

When I wipe the sweat from my forehead, the back of my hand comes away with several squished mosquitos on it. I wrinkle my nose and rub them off on my jeans, and then glance over at the ground near the drainage pipe. An armada of blowflies is roosting there, despite our best efforts to carry the contaminated dirt away with shovels and then cover everything with fresh earth. I know I shouldn't care whether the cleanup works or not, since I'm not going to be here much longer, but I still help as diligently as if the situation actually affected me. And I know why I'm so eager, too. It's not to lull Brendan into a sense of security, to make him think I'm not planning on trying to escape. It's because I feel bad about abandoning him.

After we finish shoveling another load of fresh, dry dirt into the bucket and shaking it out over the smelly spot, Brendan pulls the camper forward a little so that we're not right next to the worst of it. Then he drains the grey-water tank, and we carry the buckets to the

stream together, bathed in sweat and heat and the stench that's still seeping from our pores.

Later, in the shower, I lather up beyond recognition, twice, three times, over and over. Grey is in here with me, and he gets the same treatment, but against all expectations, he doesn't seem to mind the suds and the warm water at all.

Before taking his turn in the bathroom, Brendan shackles me as usual, of course. And he takes his time in there, of course.

It's already afternoon by the time I start hanging our wet clothes, and he opens a giant can of chili con carne. The air is getting cooler already. A soft breeze rustles through the treetops, carrying the scent of spruce and resin, which is a real blessing after that stench. I keep letting my eyes drift to Brendan without meaning to. He's wearing grey cargo pants and a dark-brown T-shirt that brings out his hair and eyes. To the outside world, we would probably look like a happy couple on a survival trip. Grey frolics between us, spraying us with fine droplets whenever he shakes himself off. He's like a sheepdog puppy, bounding from Brendan to me and back again, tumbling around and between my legs so that I'm constantly stumbling over him and losing my flip-flops.

This time, I land on a sharp stone and curse loudly. Spraining my ankle right before I escape would totally be the cherry on top of everything. I probably should have left my hiking boots on, but they're soaking wet, so they're sitting in a sunny spot near the camper to dry.

I reach into the wash bucket to hang Brendan's wet cargo pants on the line, but then I stop and sneak a quick glance in his direction. He pours the can of chili into a pot and hangs the pot on the hook of the tripod thing he cobbled together yesterday. Logs and tinder are already layered neatly underneath. Cooking over an open fire is his newest mission. He thinks it'll help us save propane so we don't run low during the winter.

I slip behind the tree I've knotted one end of the clothesline around. It doesn't hide me completely, but it's enough to let me slide my hand discreetly into the top left pocket of Brendan's pants—which is where I saw him put the lighter not long ago. Maybe he

forgot it in there, amid all the chaos? I feel something hard against my fingertips. Cool metal. A rectangular shape. My heart hammers in my throat as I close my fist tightly around the small object and pull it out. It's Brendan's Zippo! Does it still work? I can't try it, because he's only about fifteen feet away.

"Hey, Lou, are those my pants?" he calls at that exact moment. "Throw the lighter here, would you? I wonder if it survived the dunking..."

I freeze. My hand cramps around the metal, making the bells on the cable tie jingle. A dozen possibilities go through my mind. I could drop it and hope he doesn't see it, and then retrieve it later. I could give it to him and lose this opportunity. I could put it in my pocket.

"Lou? Earth to Lou!" The impatient note in Brendan's voice makes me act immediately: I slip the lighter into my shorts pocket. I'm light-headed with fear. If he finds it on me, he'll get suspicious. He'll want to know why I took it from him. And if I can't come up with a good excuse quickly, he'll put two and two together. He might even go search my closet and find the plastic baggies and the bandages.

I still can't make myself respond. I see he's coming toward me, watch him approach as though through a haze of fog. If he starts doubting me, he'll start using the chains again.

"I... I don't see it." I hold up the pants, mostly to have something to do with my hands. "Maybe you... lost it in the lake? Or while you were washing off?" Please, God, don't let him see how badly my hands are shaking.

"Hm!" Brendan takes the pants and starts rummaging through the pockets, but his eyes are fixed on me. Dammit, what if he sees the outline of the lighter in my pocket? Instinctively, I tug my white ruffled blouse down an inch. "That sucks!" After thoroughly inspecting the pants, Brendan tosses them over the clothesline.

"Did you only have the one?" My voice sounds shrill and frightened to me.

"Of course not," he snaps as if it's a completely stupid question. "But that was the only gas lighter." He gives me a once-over. "Are you cold or something?"

"I don't feel so good," I reply evasively.

"Maybe you're getting sick. Your whole body's shaking, Lou." His lips are pressed together, and his eyes are narrowed to scythes. He takes a step toward me, so he's right there beside me. "I'm only going to ask this once, and I expect you to be honest. Did you take the lighter, yes or no?"

"No!" I squeak.

He presses his lips even more tightly, until they're as white as chalk. "Okay." His voice is dark with fury. I *know* he knows, I'm sure of it, but now there's no going back.

"Can I go in?" I ask quietly.

"I told you, quit asking permission to do every single goddamn thing! It's sickening." His expression turns masklike. "As if I'm some kind of monster that never lets you do anything!"

Hopefully he's not going to have one of his attacks now, just because he thinks I'm trying to go behind his back somehow.

I slide past him, keeping a safe distance, terrified that he'll suddenly grab me, throw me to the ground and choke me... or whatever. The tightrope I have to walk in his presence is suddenly clearer than ever. How could I have forgotten?

As I walk up the stairs, I glance back at him over my shoulder. He's standing in exactly the same place, watching me. A chill runs down my back, and I curse the lighter in my pocket. Once I'm out of sight, I wrack my brain feverishly, trying to think of a good place to hide it. He promised not to touch me anymore, but he never said anything about my closets or cabinets. But I don't want to carry it around with me, in case his idea of not-touching-anymore doesn't include the occasional pat down search. Dammit, where? I look outside again. Brendan's coming toward the RV with long strides, still scowling. Grey's following him, but further away than usual—no doubt he senses Brendan's anger. At the last minute, I throw myself onto the bed and pull the blanket all the way to my chin.

I hold my breath when Brendan comes in, and shift around so I can watch him. He barely deigns to glance in my direction as he stalks to the cupboard above the side door, unlocks it, and removes a pack of matches. After that, he plucks out a small, brown bottle

and sticks it into his pocket. A heavy sensation spreads through my stomach. Were those the knockout drops?

He looks at me again, his eyes inky black and cheerless, like I've ruined everything. Then he slams the cupboard shut and stomps back out toward the fire.

He left the cupboard unlocked.

Is he actually trying to set a trap for me that obviously?

I straighten up and draw the lighter out of my pocket. If only I could just leave right now! Cautiously, I flick it. Nothing happens. I feel like hammering my head against the wall in frustration. I try again. Click. Nothing. Tears spring to my eyes. I risked his fury for nothing. Now I bet he's going to put those drops in my food tonight and I'll wake up in the box again. That's probably how he'll punish me for lying. I burrow deeper in the blanket to shield myself against the icy terror inside me. But if he wanted to put me in the box, he wouldn't need to use drugs. He could simply knock me out cold. Then again, he has an especially unhealthy relationship with the word pain—maybe he doesn't want to hurt me physically.

I don't know what to do. Finally, I walk to the window and watch as Brendan stokes the fire and stirs the contents of the pot. Grey smells the meat, and he's slinking around Brendan and the fire in progressively smaller circles. Lately he's started acting like a starving tiger around anything that smells even remotely edible.

All at once, it hits me how much of a problem Grey is. He'll be able to track my scent for miles! When I leave, I'll have to make sure Grey is asleep. But I can't exactly give him knockout drops, can I? Is that why Brendan left the cupboard open? To trick me into stealing knockout drops so that he can catch me in the act?

Does he really think that far ahead?

I peek out. Flames are flickering upward, licking at the pot. Brendan's just standing there, staring into the fire. He's going to react to the thing with the lighter somehow. I'm sure of it. He always reacts. To everything. And I know he didn't believe me—otherwise he wouldn't have gotten so mad. He won't even care whether the lighter still works or not. What would I do with it anyway? Set the camper on fire and burn all of our supplies? How would I do that

without him seeing me? Even if he's somehow figured out that I want it to help me survive in the wilderness, I'd have to get past him first. No, the only thing he cares about is that I lied. I broke his trust.

I hold my hand away from the window so he won't see me testing it again. This time, I manage to coax out a flame. It's small and weak, but hopefully the thing has enough fluid in it for a day or two.

It'll work. It *has* to!

Suddenly, there's nothing but chaos in my head. I have to get away before Brendan can react to me breaking his trust. He's probably out there trying to decide what he needs to do in order to control me. No doubt he'll do whatever he thinks will be most effective, regardless of how miserable it makes me.

Your tears won't help you. Tears never help. Not with me.

I haven't forgotten he said that. How could I?

As if in a trance, I go over to my closet and pull on a pair of jeans and a greenish-grey sweatshirt, and I pluck a pair of socks from the floor. Then I shove the plastic baggie with the bandages and the lighter into my underwear. I slip into the bathroom to grab the scissors and a few rolls of gauze. I stuff the gauze into the kangaroo pocket of my hoodie, and tuck the scissors into my back pocket, which is covered by the sweatshirt.

I set the tea kettle on the stove as I walk past the kitchen unit, and then go outside. Brendan's standing with his back to me, stirring the chili. The wind is whipping his hair in every direction. It might be a good idea to get a proper meal in before I take off. Then again, I don't trust Brendan any further than I can throw him, especially not now that I know he took the knockout drops out. And didn't even bother to hide it.

"I'm gonna make Grey's milk," I call to him and grab my hiking boots, which are sitting several feet from the campfire.

Brendan mutters something I don't catch.

It's probably just as well that he's so angry—it makes leaving that much easier when I can see this other side of him. Fear can be paralyzing, but it's also a good motivator.

I trudge into the camper on stiff legs and then hurriedly change into my hiking boots before rummaging through the drawers as fast as I can. Four granola bars, a package of hazelnuts, and a couple of cookies land in the kangaroo pocket, along with a couple of sandwich baggies. I don't have a knife, I don't have a rope, I don't have any protection from the rain, but I have to go before it's too late.

My heart is pounding wildly. This absolutely can't go wrong, because otherwise I won't get another chance to escape until spring, and I can't do that to Ethan. So I have to pull myself together. No mistakes. My gaze darts to the cabinet Brendan usually keeps locked. Maybe it would be easier to steal some of those sleeping pills and sneak them into Brendan's chili or something? No, no. I have no idea what's in those bottles or how to dose them. I might accidentally kill him. Anyway, he obviously left that cabinet open on purpose to tempt me. He must think I'm ridiculously naive.

He may have a phone hidden up there, though. Maybe I could call somebody. *Right, I'm sure the reception around here is fantastic. And seriously, do you really think he'd have been dumb enough to leave the cabinet open if he had a phone hidden in there?*

A gust of wind blows through the camper, and a loose sheet of paper spirals out of the cabinet and lands at my feet. I can't help it—I pick it up and flip it over to look at it.

I can see that it's one of Brendan's bleak drawings, but I'm not immediately sure what it's supposed to be a drawing of... I blink a few times, clearing my vision, but it doesn't help. It's the perspective, it's like nothing I've ever seen. I'm looking at something dark and solid from underneath, something that's threatening to crush me. My stomach twists at the very sight of it, and I sink down onto the bench. I think about what Jayden once said about art. A good story is like a good piece of music, he said. There's always a pattern to it, an interplay of light and shadows, woven together like a delicate web. Anybody can read a story or hear music or look at a painting and interpret it for themselves—the art itself is just the cocoon that the butterflies emerge from. Jayden called those

patterns subconscious dreams, or else the deeply buried dream of life, because he thought that one sounded better.

But Brendan's drawing is different. There's no light in it, not even a hint of it. The sheer weight of the darkness is enough to crush the viewer. There's no pattern here, it's just a place of absolute torture, entirely outside the rational world. Stagnation. Death. It reminds me of the box... it could be a lid. When I look more closely, I see a fine wood grain in the structure, and the sides seem to slant downward.

My hand flies to my throat when I see it. It's a coffin lid, seen from underneath.

Shreds of memory tumble through my head, as if on the wind.

I'm nothing. Nobody can love me. I should be dead. Buried in the ground, in the darkness... I'm nothing... That's exactly why I wanted you, Lou. You're the light. You're like a sun. You were always so radiant in your pictures, like life was easy for you...

He thinks I'm his salvation. That's why I'm here. It's never been so clear to me as it is right now. I remember what he said about the glass coffin. How perfectly that described the feeling. But in reality, he's the one who's still buried. Which is why he loves the light, his light... me.

I feel even sicker. Is this picture supposed to be a symbolic expression of how he's feeling, or did he actually experience it? I think maybe it really happened to him, because I remember the look he gave me when I asked if he was going to lock me in the box again. Like he shared my fear of the belly of the monster.

With shaking fingers, I set the drawing on the table, dazed with the horror that the drawing triggers within me. The insane part of me that likes Brendan wants to run to him and throw my arms around him, to hold him and comfort him. To tell him that the light can be everywhere if he can learn to stop seeing the world through the shadows of his past.

I stand up and take a deep breath, out longer than in, to drive away the veil of darkness. I have to go. Sympathizing with Brendan won't help him. No one and nothing can help him, apart from a good psychiatrist. Wanting to heal him is pointless. I have to forget about the way his eyes twinkle so mysteriously, about how I see my own

desires reflected in them. I have to forget that he's a guy and I'm a girl. I have to forget that he's the shadow and I'm the light... that we could complete one another if we wanted to.

I have to do it now, or I'll never do it at all. I have everything I need. Not wanting to appear suspicious, I call out for Grey, and he hops up the stairs right away on his clumsy, awkward legs.

I pet him softly, and then lift him to my face and press my nose against the top of his head. "I'll miss you, Grey, honey," I whisper. I still don't know how I'm going to shake him off my trail later. I'll have to improvise that part as I go along. My only hope is if he loses my scent in the lake. Brendan might take that as a sign that I'm running through the creek, so I may have to abandon my plan to run alongside it. Right now, I couldn't care less, as long as I escape in the first place.

Carefully, not wanting to draw any attention, I kneel on the floor and hold the lighter directly underneath the propane detector. I'm glad I won't have to turn on all the stove burners, because that really would be risky. One spark and the camper would go up in a supernova. I set my jaw in determination and click the lighter, and a small flame flickers to life.

It's not even three seconds before the alarm goes off—a monotone, piercing beeping noise that vibrates my eardrums painfully. I leap to my feet and crank the stove burner underneath the tea kettle as high as it will go. That way Brendan will assume it was a leak.

Grey's already bolted outside, terrified by the racket. Through the mirror above the sink, I see Brendan running toward the camper. His anger seems to have melted away; his face is as white as a sheet. "Get out, get out now!" he shouts when I appear at the side door, trying to look confused. "Is anything still on in there?" Despite his promise, he grabs my arm and wrenches me outside with such force that I stumble down the stairs.

"The s-stove," I stammer. I don't even have to fake being scared.

"Okay." Brendan nods curtly. "Go over there," he says, pointing to the spruces separating the campfire area from the lake. "All the way

to the right. I want to be able to see you from here." He pushes me toward the tree line and then disappears behind the camper.

I run to the place he pointed at, frantically trying to figure out how to get away from there. My only shot will be the moment when he turns off the gas, because he'll have to concentrate on that. I picture it being like defusing a bomb, but I suppose it's a lot simpler than that.

"Where's Grey?" I call to him, but the alarm is so loud that he might not hear me. Damn, the noise is perfect—it drowns out the bells and my movements through the underbrush. "Grey?" I pretend to keep calling out for him, even though I see him right there behind a straggly bush, sniffing around at something that may have once been a mouse.

I turn to look at Brendan. He's hooking the hatch open so he can get at the gas canister more easily. He casts a fleeting glance in my direction, but I can tell he's not really focused on me. My heart is pounding. "Grey?" I shout, loud enough that surely Brendan will hear me and start tramping across the ferns and roots like a stork. My mind is racing. He won't risk coming after me until he's turned the oven off. If I know one thing, it's that he'll be sure he can still catch up to me easily.

I take another step. He already can't see me anymore.

"Grey?" I yell so loudly that the wolf jumps in alarm. Blood is rushing in my ears, racing through my body like a storm. My legs are tingling with the adrenaline flooding through my system. I can't wait any longer.

CHAPTER 17

Branches whip across my face, scratching my cheeks. I stumble over a gnarled root, catch myself in time, but it costs me precious seconds. The eyelets on the hiking boots keep snagging on ferns, and I can feel myself leaving a telltale trail through the greenery leading from the forest to the lake. I don't turn around until I reach the shore. The trees are so thick that I can't see anything anyway.

I can still hear the alarm from here. Beep-beep-beep. Echoing as loudly as my thundering heart. My idea of hiding behind the waterfall until Brendan wanders into the forest suddenly strikes me as idiotic. What if he finds me back there and flips out? In a moment of blind desperation, I dunk the bells on my wrists into the water, and then tuck my sweatshirt over them. At least I still remembered to do that! I glance to my left and right, not sure what to do next. Grey's probably still busy with that dead mouse, but he'll smell me, and Brendan will know to take advantage of that. Where should I go? This is the most terrified I've ever been in my life, except for the time I spent in the box and the moment Brendan pressed that cloth against my face. Tears spring to my eyes.

Running straight into the creek is most likely my only option, because of Grey. Once Grey loses my scent, Brendan will figure out which direction I must have gone, but hopefully I'll have enough of a head start.

I wade through the shallow water as quickly as I can, toward the spot where the water has worn the sharply angled creek bed into the ground. Icy water laps around my calves, soaking my socks and the hem of my jeans. Doesn't matter. Nothing matters. I can dry my stuff later if I can just get out of here. I jump from one large rock to the next, across the transition from the lake to the creek.

Clenching my jaw, more from cold than fear, I try to keep my balance on the slippery stones, but it's practically impossible. It's not the moist, grey-green moss or the thick algae blanketing the rocks—it's just the fact that I can't tell which of them are stuck firmly into the creek bed and which are loose, ready to roll away as soon as I step clumsily onto them. Keeping my balance requires both hands, and I can already tell I'm moving much too slowly. Brendan doesn't have to cover his tracks, and I picture him hastening alongside the creek, bounding toward me like a wolf, like a hunter... grabbing me, shouting at me... or worse...

I stop, breathless. Something's different. The air is still. The splashing water is so loud it nearly tears me apart inside. Brendan's shut the alarm off. He's inside the camper!

Oh, God, not already! I don't think I've made it three hundred feet yet. Panicked, I clamber over a couple of boulders and onto the shore, and against all reason, I continue along the embankment, through the jungle of tall grass, ferns, and weeds separating the forest and the creek. Waist-high stinging nettles brush my hands, making my fingers burn, so I veer closer to the creek as I run, slipping on wet roots and the old, damp leaves of the few birch trees.

"Louisa!" Brendan's voice thunders through the trees like he's trying to slam me to the ground with it. "Come back!"

I stop, frozen in terror. Where is he? I glance back over my shoulder, but I don't see him anywhere. I'm not good at judging distances, but I think I probably have almost a quarter-mile head start now.

I listen for a few seconds, catching my breath.

"Louisa! Come! Back! Now!"

Hearing his enraged voice is enough to kill my hopes. Like I never really had a chance. In the distance, I hear Grey howling, which I've never heard him do. Can he sense that I'm leaving him forever? Maybe it's that mournful, accusatory sound that drives me onward. I start running again, but slower so that I can keep going longer. I'm just now starting to realize how steeply the ground drops off. I hear Brendan yelling again. *Louisa! Louisa! Louisa!* Raw and wild. *Louisa!* Completely out of his mind. He shouts things I don't understand, because he's so furious he's confusing his words, barely getting them out. Is he already having a flashback?

After a while, he stops, leaving behind the same eerie silence as before, after the alarm stopped beeping. Since Brendan isn't shouting anymore, I can't tell if he's coming this way or going in a different direction. I don't know which is worse: hearing him, or hearing only the silent forest. He could pop up behind me at any second—I know how quietly he can move when he wants to. Like a predatory cat, lulling his prey into a sense of security until the very last second. The thought terrifies me so much that I find myself glancing over my shoulder every ten steps or so, but I don't see anything, don't hear anything. This ragged breathing is giving me a terrible stitch, and pressing both hands against my side it is the only way I can keep running. I comfort myself with the knowledge that, if and when Brendan has his flashback, he probably won't be able to move silently anymore.

Once I've made it another half-mile or so along the shore, I risk venturing into the creek again. The water is breathtakingly cold, probably barely above freezing. My toes are completely numb after a minute or two, but I know I need to keep going for another half-mile at least so that Grey will lose my trail. I lift my feet extra-high with every step, trying to picture the fire I'm going to build tonight. A small, hot fire that will warm me up and dry me off. I imagine it crackling and popping, picture myself curled up beside it like a hedgehog. After a while, I don't even notice the cold anymore. Either I'm too focused on not slipping as I do this stork-running thing, or my feet are frozen solid.

After several minutes, the ground flattens out, and the water stretches out to either side, like an animal that suddenly has more room. Two smaller streams feed into it on my right. The bed is mostly gravel now, with only the occasional smooth boulder dividing the current, rippling the water into white waves. The creek is as broad as our Road to Nowhere back home. I come to a halt—my right side hurts so badly that I can barely breathe—and cast a fleeting glance across the green valley the creek is extending into. Pale late-afternoon light scatters on the surface of the water, giving it a matte silver gleam that seems otherworldly amid the dark conifers towering into the heavens on either side. If I weren't so scared and out of breath, I might even stop and enjoy the view. I grit my teeth and try to start running again, but there's just no way.

I wade to shore, sucking in deep lungfuls of the fresh, moist air, and plunge my burning hands into the water to cool them. The sleeves of the sweatshirt are immediately soaked through. As I push them up, the cable tie full of bells catches my eye. My silencing trick has been working well this whole time, but I don't want to rely on it. I fish the scissors from my pants pocket, and then sit down on a moss-covered stone to cut the band. The cable tie material is tough, though, and although the scissors are sharp, they're fairly small. I keep sawing and filing away at the band, listening tensely for sudden noises as I work, but all I hear besides the rushing water are a couple of birds. Once in a while, a breeze rustles through the treetops and knocks a pine cone to the ground with a muted thud—or occasionally a crack when the pine cone lands on a pile of dead wood. I jump every single time, thinking it's Brendan, and then breathe a sigh of relief a moment later.

I just can't wrap my head around the fact that I've gotten away from him this easily. There's no way, is there? I know I'm free, but the rush of euphoria hasn't hit me yet.

Once I've finally managed to slice through the cable tie, I use a rock to sink the bells into the creek bed. When I straighten up, I spot a path winding into the bushes on the other side of the water.

My heart starts beating wildly. I don't dare get my hopes up that much, right? *A trail*! I can barely believe my luck, and immediately I

start bounding through the creek like a lunatic, churning the water. Where there's a trail, there will be hikers. Canada may be isolated in parts, but that also makes it a nature-freak paradise.

But when I peer more closely at the line of trampled grass, a thick lump of disappointment forms in my stomach. It's hoof tracks, not footprints. Probably a game trail for deer or caribou.

I keep moving, slowly realizing how alone I actually am if I've gotten away from Brendan. My only companions out here are the wild animals that I assume are already eyeing me from a safe distance, wondering what to make of me. Black bears. Grizzlies. Wolves. Elk. Male elk are supposedly even more dangerous than bears. I squint around, scanning the area, but practically anything could be hiding in the thick vegetation lining both sides of the creek here. I know I should be singing loudly so I won't surprise the bears, but that would obviously make it ten times easier for Brendan to track me.

I'm so absorbed in my surroundings that I don't notice how much stronger the current around my calves has gotten until it's nearly too late. I freeze in place for a moment, and then bound hurriedly to shore. I glance up and down the silvery surface of the water. The creek was perfectly flat this whole time, barely knee-deep, and it hadn't occurred to me that it might change. The ground still isn't sloped too steeply, but I still have to be careful—what if it suddenly drops off and I get swept away by the current? Ethan once told me that even experienced swimmers sometimes drown in mountain creeks. I decide to stay close to the shore, near the willow herb, nettles, and swamp grass.

There's a rushing sound in the distance, and it gets louder with every step I take. The air is heavy with cold moisture that clings to my clothes like a second, clammy skin. I squint, trying to make out what's up ahead, but the dark spruce branches hanging nearly to the ground make it impossible to see more than ten feet in any direction. I follow a bend in the creek, and all at once, it seems to end in mid-air. The rushing swells until it drowns out the sound of birdsong.

The bad feeling in my gut intensifies. It must be a waterfall, and I can't tell how steeply it drops off yet. To be on the safe side, I get out of the water and approach through the forest. It takes forever to get to the spot, but then I discover just how much of a catastrophe this is: the creek drops straight down into a steep ravine. A couple of trees hang drunkenly over the rocks as though staring into the abyss. I'll never get down there, not without breaking every bone in my body.

Cautiously, I walk along the edge. Thirty or forty feet, at least, with sharp rocks poking threateningly out from the side of the grey mountain-monster. I follow the creek with my eyes, watch the water tumble into the depths of the ravine, where it feeds into a large river that winds through the valley.

Exhausted, I grab hold of one of the birches leaning out over the cliff, and clutch a thick, horizontal limb for support. My throat tightens in despair and frustration. I'm not getting any further. But I can't go back, no way, not in a million years. Brendan's somewhere in the forest, searching for me.

Just as I've made up my mind to keep moving along the edge of the cliff until I reach a less-steep place to descend, I jump at the sound of a cracking twig. My hands tense around the tree limb. That wasn't a pine cone falling on dead wood. Heart racing, I turn around. And turn to ice.

Brendan's at the edge of the forest, maybe thirty feet away. Against the backdrop of dark spruces, his face is almost ethereally pale. His expression is calm and solemn, but the fire in his eyes singes me. That disconnect between outward composure and inner rage is what terrifies me more than anything. It's as if his two faces are fighting inside him, and there's no telling yet which one has the upper hand.

"Bren..." I gasp for breath, horrified. I want to say something to calm him down, but terror devours the words.

"End of the line!" He comes closer. Stoically. One step. Two steps. "The property ends here, at this ravine. You can run as far as you want along this cliff, you'll never reach the valley."

The information hits me with such force that I nearly black out. He knew from the beginning that I didn't have the slightest chance of escaping in this direction. It's only then that I spot the path behind him and realize just how stupid I was. He's been setting traps in this area for weeks. He knows the whole area and every game trail in it. All he had to do was pick one. I bet he even beat me here, and he's been sitting around waiting for me to arrive. Bile rises in my throat.

"Come here, don't make it any worse for yourself."

That's when I see the chain and the handcuffs in his left hand.

I retreat, clutching the limb of the birch tree, but the ground is loose. A couple of rocks roll away and tumble into the depths of the ravine.

"Watch out!" Brendan exclaims in alarm, and my heart does a terrified leap in my chest. Immediately, I clamber up the tree, which is growing almost horizontally over the ravine.

"One more step and I'll jump!" I warn him, and I'm so desperate I actually believe my own ears.

Brendan stops. "I'm not trying to scare you, Lou," he says, but it sounds mechanical, like a phrase he's memorized in case of emergency. Every muscle in his body is tense. "I'm not going to hurt you. I've told you that a hundred times, and it's not going to change. Not even now." His black T-shirt is so wet with sweat, it looks like he's just emerged from a swimming pool. "Come on, Lou. You know what will happen."

"No!" I shake my head frantically. "I don't want to be chained up like a prisoner again." Were those feelings I had for him ever real? How could I possibly be attracted to someone I'm so deathly afraid of? They must not be real, they must be a product of my own loneliness.

"It was my fault," Brendan says, jolting me back to the present. "I shouldn't have made it so easy for you." I must be giving him a look of confusion, because he hurries on to his next thought. "As soon as I realized that you'd taken my lighter, I knew you were plotting something. I should have reacted immediately." His smile is

so tortured, I think it may kill me. “Now it’s too late. I’m going to bring you back, and you’ll start hating me again.”

He may be right, I realize with a pang in my chest. The feelings I have toward him, wherever they are and wherever they’ve come from, might not survive tonight. I may end up hating him forever after this.

“Why didn’t you search me if you were so sure?” I ask defiantly.

He closes his eyes for a moment and shakes his head in impatience, like he doesn’t have time for these silly explanations. “I promised you I wouldn’t touch you. How could I have—”

“So you left the cabinet open instead. To test me.”

“No.” He reaches into his bag and pulls out the small, brown bottle. “That was carelessness. I was pissed off, and I felt a flashback coming on. Anyway, there’s nothing else in there that would have helped you get away from me.” He gazes at the brown glass as though lost in thought.

“What’s that for?” I can’t go forward, can’t go back. I’m caught in a trap, like one of his rabbits. My throat starts burning. It doesn’t matter what I think about him, what I feel for him—I might be about to lose all of it. Then things will go back to the way they were at first.

“I’m going to put you to sleep so that I don’t have to drag you back by force. For your sake.”

His honesty is like a slap in the face. The good intentions behind it are a punch in the stomach. How can he claim I’m his “light” and then do these things to me?

To buy myself some time, I straddle the tree limb that stretches over the ravine like an extension of the boulder. I’m absolutely positive about one thing: I am not leaving this tree of my own free will.

“I’d rather jump than let you force more of that shit down my throat!” I snap furiously and scoot slightly away, so that I’m over the ravine. I think I may be about to have a nervous breakdown.

“Lou, come down from there, right now!” It’s definitely a command, not a request, but I hear a note of fear in it, too.

I slide out a little further, as if to prove to myself that I'm serious. My feet are dangling in the air; the wind whips my hair in every direction. "Go away!" My shoulders are shaking.

"Lou." Brendan's voice drops to a whisper, so tender it makes me want to scream. "I'm not trying to make you suffer. I know how much you miss your brothers. If I'd known how bad this would be for you, I..."

"You'd have kidnapped some other girl?" I shout, cutting him off. "We've been over this."

He shakes his head. "I only ever wanted you, and you know why. Which is also why I don't think you're going to throw yourself off of there. You love life too much."

A flood of tears streams down my face. "You took my life away from me. You *stole* it."

Brendan stands there, thunderstruck. A look of pure suffering flickers on his face, which makes me remember that drawing of his that I found. I hate myself for empathizing with him, but I guess that's life. None of us can control how we feel about other people. We can lie to ourselves about it, suppress feelings we think are wrong, but at the end of the day, the truth is the truth.

Brendan slips the bottle back into his pocket before stretching a hand toward me, seeming to sense my contradictory emotions. "Don't do this, Lou... please..."

I stare down into the ravine. Raging waves, sharp rocks, nothingness. If I let myself fall, I'll either drown in the river or smash against the ground. Wheezing, I scoot out a bit further. My heart is fluttering in a way that's making me nauseated.

"Lou. I know you never wanted any of this. You're desperate, and you want to prove it to me, even willing to put yourself in danger just to make your point. But you know what? I get it." Brendan takes a couple steps back, and then walks a short distance along the cliff. For one terrifying moment, I think he's preparing to jump. *No, don't!* I nearly scream, but then I see that he's winding up for a throw. The chain and the handcuffs fly over the edge in a high arc.

"See?" he calls in my direction with a short, rueful laugh.

I'm going back and forth between despair, affection, and fear. I'm not sure which one is strongest. He slides the brown bottle out of his pocket again. It looks as though he's going to toss that as well, but then, abruptly, he sinks to his knees, and the bottle slips from his grasp. He clutches the ground with both hands, clawing at the dirt, digging his fingers into it. He's whispering something, but I can't make it out over the wind whistling in my ears.

But I can guess.

So dark, so dark … in the ground … why did you leave? Don't stop breathing. Don't stop breathing. Keep your hands still. Don't cry. Don't stop breathing...

"Bren?" I hear the high, frightened waver in my voice. *Please, don't flip out, not now!* "Bren!"

He looks in my direction, but without seeing me. From one minute to the next, he's miles away, or at least his mind is. Panic spreads through my chest. If he loses it now, he may try to pull me out of the tree using force, so he can hit me or choke me or I don't know what. We might both end up going over the cliff.

I wrack my brain desperately. I talked him through it on the night of the thunderstorm, but he was also safely chained up on level ground, not standing near the edge of a ravine. And sometimes the talking didn't even help anyway.

"Bren!" I call loudly. I have to get him to snap out of it before it sucks him in completely. "Bren? It's okay, you're here, with me, you're not anywhere else. Bren... it's me... Lou."

It'd work better if I went over and put my arms around him, but I don't dare come down from the tree, so I simply keep talking. "Bren, I don't know what terrible things happened to you in the past... but that's over now, okay? You're free, you're not locked up, you just have to see it."

He shakes his head vehemently, rocking back and forth.

"Bren... it's okay," I call. "You're not trapped."

"Lies!" he suddenly hisses. The rocking stops. "It's getting dark." He jumps to his feet and strides toward me, his face distorted with hate. Finally, he stops directly in front of the birch tree, barely five

feet away. “That was you,” he says hoarsely. “It’s all your fault. Why did you leave? Why did you leave me alone with him?”

I cling desperately to the tree, praying that he won’t try to climb up after me when he’s in this state. “It wasn’t me,” I whisper with my dry throat, not sure if he’s hearing me. “That was someone else. Brendan, I saw one of your drawings... you have to get help...”

“You never loved me!” he shouts, clenching his fists. “You went away and left me alone with him. Even though you knew exactly how he is! You knew! I *hate* you!” His eyes are shining with unshed tears, and every muscle in his body is so cramped, it’s like rage and hatred are the only things holding it together.

I’m starting to get a faint idea of what happened to him. His mother must have left him and his father. Was his father the person who did those horrible things to him that he can’t find words for?

Brendan braces himself against the trunk of the tree with one foot, and then grips the tree limb with one hand. “Come down from there! Now! I’m not going to let you disappear again!”

“Bren... please...”

“Come! Down! From! There!” he bellows.

I start crying again. I’m frozen in terror.

His expression changes, twists into a hateful sneer. “There you go, crying again. Didn’t I tell you to quit sniveling like a little girl?” He kicks out at me as if he’s trying to curb-stomp me or something. “I should stick you in a box and bury you underground—then you’d have a reason to cry!”

“Bren...” I whisper, weeping. “It’s me, Lou. Lou, the girl you kidnapped. And yeah, I ran away, I wanted to leave you, but I don’t hate you. In fact, part of me genuinely likes you.”

He stops for a moment, as though having some kind of epiphany.

“Bren! Look at me, please.”

The hateful expression vanishes from his face. One of his eyelids twitches.

It seems like I’m doing something right, so I keep talking. He’s not going to remember any of this anyway.

“Okay, I admit, the part of me that, that likes you is obviously insane, completely batshit crazy, like those guys in New York City

that surf on top of subway trains, but it's true. I don't get it either. It's the part of me that wishes you'd invited me back to your camper for a beer or whatever, and then kissed me. You were right, I shouldn't have run from it."

He stares at me, and I can actually see his eyes clearing up, becoming his again. "Louisa?" he asks, sounding confused, like he's just been beamed here from another planet. "What the hell are you doing up there?"

A flood of relieved tears streams down my face. "Sitting in a tree, being scared to death." It comes out in a wavery whisper.

A faint smile flickers across his tense face. "I was out, wasn't I?"

I nod and feel the tension beginning to drain from my body. "Totally."

"It's too dangerous." He retreats behind the tree, glancing around, and then gestures with the bottle. "Come down here, please..."

I'm still dazed with fear. A gust of wind billows my sweatshirt outward. I clutch the tree tightly with my knees, digging my nails into the flaking bark. "I'm not drinking that!"

"It takes effect almost immediately. I tinkered with it for a long time to get the perfect mixture." Brendan takes another step back, and then another. "It was supposed to be for you, so it won't have as strong an effect on me... I mean, I weigh more than you do."

Now I'm officially lost. "On you?"

Brendan puts the small bottle to his lips and drains it in one go. He grimaces like he's swallowing a raw egg. "I wasn't planning on taking it myself, but I figure it's the only way to get you out of that goddamn tree. I don't know when I'm going to have another attack... what if I decide to try and yank you down from there? Or you get scared of the way I'm acting and lose your balance..." He disappears into the darkness of the forest. I can't hear what he's saying anymore.

Is he trying to trick me into coming down? I stay where I am for a few moments, trying to ignore the frosty wind caressing my soaked pant legs.

"Bren?" My stomach knots like a rope. Brendan's nowhere in sight. No, that wasn't a trick. He couldn't have known I was going to climb the tree. Carefully, I slide back from the ravine until I'm standing on solid ground again. I shiver as I trot after Brendan into the forest, and discover him sitting a safe distance from the cliff. He's leaning back against a tree, ghostly pale. I stop about five feet away, as close as I dare get.

"You shouldn't run, too... dangerous," he slurs when he sees me, wiping his hands across his sweaty face. "Plus I'll find you either way." That stuff must be starting to work already. What the hell did he just drink? His eyelids flutter. "It'll get way too cold at night, you'll freeze to death."

"I have your lighter," I whisper hoarsely, because I can't think of anything better to say.

He smiles weakly. "You'll set the whole forest on fire, and then I'll know where you are anyway... if you survive." He closes his eyes, and his head drops to one side. He seems vulnerable—and looks much younger to me than he ever has.

"Lou?"

"Yeah?" I finally muster the courage to approach him, though my legs nearly give out as I kneel beside him.

"Storm... tonight... stay..." He's breathing more shallowly now. "Don't go... too dangerous..." As he drifts off, his torso tips to one side. I grab him by the shoulders, but he's too heavy, and he ends up collapsing in a strangely contorted heap. I adjust his legs so he'll be more comfortable. If I had the chain now, I'd be able to use it on him instead. Was that why he threw it into the ravine first? Because he already knew he was going to drug himself?

I spend a moment studying Brendan's face more closely than I've ever done. Without the frown lines and the bitter expression, he looks so peaceful, so still. I notice several little details for the first time: the shallow dimple on his chin, the way his eyebrows are slightly thicker near the outer edges. My gaze comes to rest on his unyielding lips, and I find myself wondering whether he's ever kissed a girl, whether he's ever said "I love you" to anyone. Whether there was another girl before me, one who first made him happy, and then

left him. My stomach twists a little at the thought. Conflicting emotions well up within me, taking over against my will. I can't let them. I can't look at him and wonder how it would feel to have his arms around me, imagine what it would be like if he came over and, instead of chaining me up, ran his fingers across my cheek. Seeing him lying here, totally defenseless, suddenly makes it easy to picture those things. He made that concoction for me, but then he drank it himself so he wouldn't put me in danger. I'm not sure what that means. Actually, I don't know anything about anything anymore, apart from that I don't want to leave him out here by himself. I dig for my hatred and rage, but find only doubt, pain, and fear. Almost as if in a trance, I brush a stray hair out of his face. I expected it to be rough, but it's as soft as silk.

"Lou..." he murmurs indistinctly.

I jump back, startled, and nearly lose my balance. What the hell am I doing? Sitting here, wasting the golden opportunity he's giving me? Sure, he advised me to stay, but we both know what I'm going to do.

Brendan sighs drowsily. "If you go... Grizzlies... don't stop... singing..."

If I kneel here watching him any longer it'll tear me apart. "See you!" I whisper, forcing myself to stand up, and forcing myself not to burst into tears all over again. "If there's really a storm coming tonight, I'd better get going!"

CHAPTER 18

I've been running along the edge of the cliff for hours, trying to get the image of Brendan lying on the ground out of my mind.

My sweatshirt is clinging to my sweaty back, though my teeth are chattering with the cold. I've been following the changes in the sky nervously. The puffy edges of the dark clouds are gleaming a deep orange—a clear sign that the sun's already low on the horizon. I need to get to the valley before it gets too dark to see. There must be a path somewhere along here, or at least a spot where it'll be less dangerous to climb down from.

I know I need to stay focused on where I'm going, but part of me is still back with Brendan. One minute I'm terrified he's going to find me, the next minute I'm wishing he would. Which is totally sick and twisted! How can I possibly wish he'd find me if I'm risking my life trying to get back home?

I stumble to a halt and clutch my temples with a scream. I have to quit thinking about him. I have to keep my mind on putting one foot in front of the other. I still have no idea where I'll be able to build a fire and rest for the night. I can't risk stopping up here in the forest, because Brendan might already be awake again, hunting me.

I break into an even faster run, glancing uneasily at the clouds. The last few ravens that had been circling over the cliffs sail away with the wind, and the darting chipmunks retreat into the underbrush. I'm starting to panic, especially because the

temperature is dropping by the minute. I tug my sweatshirt down over my hands as I run, but it doesn't help. Soon my fingers are numb, my cheeks like ice. The wind howls darkly over the mountains, like a giant playing the flute. It gets so strong that I'm afraid to keep running along the cliff.

I look around, totally unsure what to do. I don't want to go back into the dense forest, which spreads out beside me like a lonely grave. No way, I can't go in there! Besides, the storm might make a branch fall on my head or something.

I wrap my arms around myself and move a few feet away from the cliff's edge. The wind tears at my clothes as if it's trying to rip them from my body. My eyes start to water, which blurs my vision. But the chill is the worst part. It crawls into me from underneath, reptilian, paralyzing my legs. The combination of cold and wind is making me clumsy. I trip over my own feet a couple of times and scrape my hands through the sweatshirt.

The temptation to sit and rest is growing steadily. Every time I pass a rock that might offer some shelter from the wind, I promise myself that I'll stop at the next one... but every time, I go right on running. Then I nearly tumble off the cliff and realize I can't keep ignoring the way I'm trembling with exhaustion. The next time I see a boulder, I collapse to the ground on the wind-protected side and curl into a ball. I know I can't let myself rest for too long without a fire—I don't want to risk falling asleep and freezing to death. But even if I can't make a fire, I can at least warm my hands for a minute. I pull the lighter out of my underwear and clench it tightly. It's wonderfully warm just from my body heat. I shield it with one hand as I hold it near my face and clumsily flick it. A yellow flame springs to life, but immediately goes out in the wind. I keep trying and trying until my thumb is black with soot. Frustrated, I shove the lighter into the kangaroo pouch of my hoodie, and struggle to my feet again.

Every bone in my body aches. I shouldn't have sat down. My legs are stiff; I can barely bend my knees. I wish to God I were home. Safe and warm.

Mechanically, I put one foot in front of the other. Left, right, left, right. Again and again. *Don't think. Run. Just a little further.* This is how soldiers must feel when they have to march through the night.

The temperature continues to drop. Something in my head starts to shift, though I only half-notice at first. I start feeling like I'm falling asleep as I run. My mind drifts away, to a place where the sun always shines, where the sagebrush lines the monotone streets and a young man stands beneath an apple tree on one leg, doing the Crane.

I see a flat-roofed wooden house with an open door, and I follow the sound of a girl's bright, silvery laughter. It seems close, yet far away. I want to catch it, that laughter I hear. Catch it, and hold onto it forever. Implant it in my chest so I'll never lose it again. Then I know I wouldn't be as cold.

Wooden floorboards creak underneath the soles of my shoes as I walk down the hallway. The laughter is coming from the yard. Mesmerized, I step out onto the veranda and stop at the top of the stairs. A little girl in a white nightshirt is twirling on the dry ground, her blonde hair flying in the wind. She looks like she's pulling on something I can't see. Her turquoise eyes are as radiant as the cloudless sky above. She has everything, this girl does. Everything. A whole world. Including things I can't see. And she knows it. The realization sends a pang through my heart. She knows. I wonder when she forgot, wonder why life made her believe she didn't have enough. I wonder if she really did forget, or if she just can't remember, so she's looking for happiness in the wrong places. I wonder if—whether I go back or not—if I can ever be that girl again, or if I've lost her forever.

My heart is suddenly burning with longing. I pick up the pace. I just need to run fast enough to catch up to the girl. I need to get home. A couple of times, I think I spy a flash of something near the cliff, a glimpse of her white nightshirt, a strand of blonde hair. I stretch my arms out, trying to catch her so that I can laugh again, so that I can be warm again.

Is this how Brendan felt when he made his plan to kidnap me? Was his heart burning like this, with such violent heat that he

couldn’t take it anymore?

The thought makes me trip again. Instinctively, I reach out for something to catch myself on, but there’s nothing there. I fly forward. The darkness encircles me, envelops me, blurs the boundaries between up and down. It happens so fast that I don’t even have time to scream. Before I fully understand that I’m falling, my back slams against something hard, and a red star of pain explodes in my head. I can’t breathe. My body slides down something smooth. Deeper and deeper. I open and close my hands, trying to grab hold of something, but it’s futile.

The last thing I’m aware of is the pain, the pain in my ankle overwhelming my senses. Then the world sinks into an ocean of huge, black waves.

When I open my eyes again, the dark sky is spinning. My head is pounding. I lie still for a while as my memory returns, reliving the fall in slow motion.

I’m afraid to move. What if I’m seriously injured? I do a mental inventory. Arms, legs, hands, feet, all shivering. Which is good, because it means I’m not paralyzed.

With great effort, I struggle into a sitting position, and my stomach immediately rebels. I spit greenish-white liquid out onto the rocks. I feel like death. I don’t think I can stand up. Now I notice the sharp, biting wind whipping my hair in all directions. Dazed, I try to get my bearings. To my left is the river I saw from above; three boulders the size of suitcases are jutting out of the water nearby. The steep slope is to my right. I’m sitting on a narrow strip of gravel. It’s too dark to see to the top, but I still know that I’m super lucky to have survived the fall.

I wipe my face with shaky hands, and water drips from the sleeves of my sweatshirt. Only then do I realize that I’m completely soaked. I look around in confusion. The gravel is wet. There’s water running down from the rock cascades into the grass at the foot of the steep slope. I spot a granola bar floating in a puddle of rainwater and mud.

My heart skips a beat. I try to reach into the kangaroo pocket of the hoodie, but my fingers seem to have other ideas. It takes me three tries to get them under control. Clumsily, I pull out a crushed cookie and a smashed granola bar. The rest is gone. I reach around to touch my back pocket and breathe a sigh of relief—the scissors are still there. But the lighter? That was in the kangaroo pocket. I fumble through the pocket one more time. Nothing.

I groan and start searching frantically, but it's nowhere nearby, either. It must be at the top somewhere, stuck among the rocks. Helpless, frightened, furious tears spring to my eyes at the realization. Why, why didn't I stick it back in my underwear? How could I be so dumb? I could smack myself.

I lean toward the puddle and fish out the granola bar. I know I should eat and drink, but I can't. I sit there for a few moments, staring out at nothing, wishing I could just burst into tears and wait for someone to come along and comfort me. But the only person who can find me here is Brendan.

With grim determination, I use the boulder beside me to hoist myself to a standing position. A wave of dizziness washes over me immediately, and I stumble to the side. A sharp pain stabs my ankle like a bread knife. Dammit! I take a few deep breaths, waiting for the pain to subside. Then I try again. Left, right—no, ouch, hop—left. It hurts so badly that I really do start crying, but I wipe my face impatiently and keep on hobbling, even though I feel like my ankle is one giant mass of splinters. Well, at least now I'm not going to fall asleep. I've heard of people walking for miles with a broken leg because they were determined not to die. And my ankle might not actually be broken. It could be just a sprain. I grit my teeth and wince. *Don't think about it!*

After what feels like an eternity, I reach a place where the river widens. The water is shallower here; countless boulders dot the middle. It's more of a mountain stream than a river. If I can cross it, I might find help on the other side. Besides, Brendan will never suspect I'm over there—crossing a river during a storm when you can't swim is completely insane. But right now, it's probably my only shot at shaking Brendan off my trail.

When I get to the shore, I find a piece of driftwood as long as my arm, swearing to myself that I'll turn back if the water reaches to my hips. Then I put a foot into the water and nearly abandon the plan immediately. Cold, so cold. I glance back through the darkness, toward the cliff. If I fell down there and lived, Brendan can probably climb down. And he will climb down, if he has even an inkling that I might somehow have landed near here.

Pressing my lips together, I feel my way across the riverbed with the driftwood, while also using it as a crutch. Left... right.... left. Everything is still here, except for the rushing of the river. The surface is like the skin of a slithering animal, dark and eerie. It takes every ounce of willpower I have to fight back the fear that suddenly, unexpectedly bubbles within me.

I'm at about the middle of the river when the waves reach my thighs. The current's so strong I'm afraid I'll lose my footing. A moment later, it tears the driftwood from my hand, and I nearly fall. Panic washes over me. I try to keep my breathing steady, but one thought has pushed its way in front of the others: I'm going to get pulled under and killed. My body is trembling so hard it's starting to cramp. I'm losing control.

Shh, Lou, calm down, please, please calm down.

Left. Right. Good, that's it!

The inner monologue helps me make it a few more feet, but just as I'm about to reach the far shore, my knees give out, and I fall into the water, stomach-first. It knocks the wind out of me for a few seconds. I instinctively clutch a nearby boulder, shaking so violently that I can't stand up. With the last of my strength, I heave myself forward using my forearms. My heart is pounding in my chest, raw and leaden, like I've just finished a marathon. I'm cursing, bawling, tasting the salty tears streaming down my cheeks.

Somehow, I manage to wriggle out of the water, and I curl into a ball on the gravel along the shore. Within minutes, my clothes are frozen stiff. I don't want to stand up anymore. I'm too cold. I stare at the gravel, mesmerized. Maybe if I lie here long enough, I'll turn to stone. At least then I won't feel anything anymore.

I close my eyes and listen to the howling wind. Rain starts pattering down on my face. I sink downward, in between the deepest layers of Antarctic ice, drenched in the waters of the South Pole...

I startle awake again, because the river's risen, and it's washing up around me. Woozily I stand up, swaying. My clothes are heavy with rain, seem to be dragging me back to the ground. I blink a few times. Directly beside me, there's a weathered wooden sign stuck in the ground. Private Property. No Trespassing. As soon as I've deciphered the message, it begins to blur and shift. I'm not sure whether that's good or bad, and I'm not really in any condition to think about it.

I stumble onward like a drunk person. My ankle isn't hurting as much now, and the uncontrollable shaking has stopped. I walk, fall, straighten up, walk on. Again and again. Somehow. After a while, I can barely see anything anymore, even though my eyes are open. I hear laughter from somewhere. The girl in the white nightshirt is nearby, dancing dreamily in the rain, arms floating. Her laughter is like a melody...

Don't forget to sing, I suddenly hear Brendan warn me. I'm not sure why I'm remembering that *now*, but maybe it'll help me stay awake. I rummage through what's left of my mind for a song, and can only come up with one, a lullaby Ethan patiently sang me night after night when I was small. I can see him sitting there on the edge of the bed, sweaty and exhausted from another long day at work.

"Hush, little baby, don't... say a word..." My voice cracks, but the memory washes over me with unrelenting warmth. I keep moving, I'm not sure how. Maybe it doesn't matter. Everything's spinning. I fall. Driftwood bores into my palms. "I'm gonna buy you... a mockingbird." I stagger to my feet. The sky flickers into its own negative, turns white, white like the girl's nightshirt. Have I finally found her? Am I home? It can't be much further, because everything hurts so much. I want to fall asleep in someone's arms, rest from this boundless exhaustion, this misery weighing so heavily on my heart. "And if that mockingbird... don't sing..." I collapse. Lying on the gravel, I try to remember the rest of the verse, but I can't think

of the words. I crawl a few more feet, but my elbows buckle like broken matches.

And then I fall one last time—into the deep, black arms of oblivion. I feel myself slide down into it and settle gently onto the dry lawn on the other side. Reddish-yellow sunlight dances on my closed eyelids. When I open my eyes again, I see the pink rhinoceros, nudging me in the shoulder with its horn like it wants to play.

"Hey!" I lie there stroking its leathery, sun-warmed skin. "There you are. Have you been waiting for me here this whole time?" I turn my head and see all of my brothers standing on the veranda. A wave of pure joy envelops me, and then everything goes dark.

CHAPTER 19

Arms embrace me. Strong, unyielding arms that lift me up. I feel myself being carried, and then being set down again a few moments later. I'm lying on something soft and warm. Oh, God, it's so warm that I want to cry. I can finally sleep. I sigh contentedly, but then I feel hands tearing at my sweatshirt. I hear the seams ripping, feel the wet material being peeled from my body. I don't know what's happening. I want to defend myself, but I'm as limp as a puppet. My legs are lifted, my shoes removed, my jeans and underwear jerked down from my hips. Everything happens quickly, in an eerie silence punctuated only by an occasional mumbled curse. I gather my strength, hoping I can draw attention to myself somehow, but all that comes out is a hint of a whimper. Some familiar sound is coming from nearby, either pattering rain or a crackling fire, I'm not sure... and next to me, I'm pretty sure I hear someone undressing, a zipper going down. Then the arms reach for me again, turn me onto my side, and draw me in like tentacles, against a body. And there's nothing I can do about it. Warm, unfamiliar skin presses against my back, my legs. *No*, I want to plead, but I can't get a sound out. A hundred horrible images flash through my head. I muster up absolutely inhuman strength and wriggle a few inches away, but the arms immediately pull me back with gentle force.

"I know you don't like it, but there's no other way." The voice is right against my ear, soft but stern.

Brendan!

Dim memories wash over me. He's found me. I didn't make it. A chaotic mix of emotions churns inside me. Despair, yes. Fear, yes. But also relief. Enormous relief. I know I should be more upset about the fact that he's found me, but the last remaining glimmer of my rational mind knows that he saved my life. Even so, I scoot away from him again. Too close! Much too close! I can feel him everywhere.

"Shh, calm down." He lays a leg on top of me and crosses my limp arms in front of my chest, enveloping me completely. "Relax!"

Oh, God, how? I'm naked! And he doesn't seem to be wearing much, either. I want to protest, but I'm too weak.

"You nearly died of hypothermia. Another hour and you wouldn't have made it."

Darkness and warmth encircle me like the steam from a hot bath. Wouldn't it be nice to let myself drift off, here in the warmth? Wherever this is?

Something rough but soft licks my face, straight across my mouth.

"Grey, leave her alone," I hear Brendan say in a scolding tone. He straightens up and does something, and the licking stops, but now I feel soft fur on my bare stomach. "You can keep her warm, that's okay."

I let out a dry sob when I hear his familiar yowl.

Brendan pulls me closer, so that my back is completely against his chest. "It's okay, Lou," he whispers. "Everything's okay. I found you. Nothing bad's happened to you." He sounds like he's fighting back emotions, maybe even tears. "I'm not trying to grope you here, I won't do anything to you. I'm warming you up, that's all."

I blink a few times before finally managing to keep my eyes open. He's still got his arms wrapped around mine. My nose bumps against something soft, and suddenly I realize that we're in a sleeping bag together. I tilt my head back and peek past the edge of the material. A massive, brilliant fire is flickering not ten feet away. I

feel its steady heat on my forehead, on the tip of my nose and my eyelids. It's so wonderful that it brings tears to my eyes. I turn to glance upward and see that there's a tarp or something over us. Maybe a tent. I close my eyes in exhaustion.

"Bren," I murmur. My tongue is heavy. "Thanks. Thanks for saving me..." The words don't come anywhere near expressing the depth of what I feel.

He inhales more deeply. Once, twice, a third time.

"No problem, Lou," he whispers back.

I don't know why, but something about the way he's holding me suddenly makes me happy in a weird, disturbing way. It feels like he'll never let me go. Which is also the thing I'm most afraid of. Maybe I'm simply grateful for the sense of safety, for the knowledge that I'm not going to freeze to death, that I'm getting a second chance. Yeah, that must be it. I feel my tense muscles relax in his warmth, feel myself settle into his arms. I'm tingling from head to toe, like my whole body is smiling. It's just that sense of safety. I'm sure of it. And he's holding me so tightly that I wouldn't be able to get away from him even if I wanted to. He'd never let me go, end of story. It's not my fault.

It's still dark when I awaken. I'm trembling again, and my teeth are chattering, but Brendan tells me it's a good sign.

The next time I wake up, it's because the warmth against my back is suddenly gone. Grey is still curled up against my stomach, but I don't feel his fur against my skin anymore. I pat my torso and realize that Brendan's put a shirt on me. I rotate my head and see him by the fire, putting on another log.

"Bren?" I murmur sleepily.

"Lou!" He looks up in surprise. His eyes gleam in the light of the fire. "How do you feel?"

"Frozen."

He laughs. The sound practically bubbles out of him, so happy and vivacious that it makes me feel even warmer. "Are you in pain?"

I take a mental inventory. Tentatively, I move my foot. The shooting pain promptly returns. “My ankle,” I croak. I’m still too weak to carry on a proper conversation.

He nods. “I saw. It’s bright blue, swollen. I’ll bandage it later.”

“How did you find me?” This whole thing seems like a dream.

He smiles, suddenly bashful, as if hearing more admiration in my tone than I do. He tucks his hair behind his ears uncertainly. “Grey found you.”

I close my eyes, because it’s exhausting to keep them open. “But... the rocks...”

Whatever Brendan’s doing, it involves something that clatters like steel or iron. “Grey found the spot where you went down. Did you fall?”

I just nod.

“You must have had a legion of guardian angels watching over you. I rappelled down with Grey. He didn’t enjoy it one bit. Peed all over my pants.”

The mental image makes me smile, and I open my eyes again to watch him. He’s stirring a pot, which is sitting in the fire atop some kind of stone platform. For a moment, I really believe that the feelings I’m having aren’t wrong. That being drawn to him, for whatever reason, doesn’t make me a bad person.

“Grey lost your scent at the river, so I figured that’s where you crossed.” He lifts the pot and carries it over to sit beside me. He’s wearing a dark down jacket and lined boots. “I made you some oatmeal. It’s no culinary masterpiece, but it’ll do the job.”

“I can’t eat.”

“You have to,” he replies gently, pulling me into a sitting position. Grey whines as he tumbles off of me, but then crawls out of the warm burrow and goes outside.

Brendan sets the pot on the ground and shoves something behind my back to prop me up. “Just a couple bites, then I’ll let you sleep again.” He dunks a wooden spoon into the pot, and I open my mouth and let him feed me like a wolf mother feeding a pup. The oatmeal tastes like cardboard, but right now it’s the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten. Maybe it’s because of the concerned look on

Brendan's face, how careful he's being with me. The first spoonful also makes me realize that I'm starving.

Much too soon, he sets the pot aside. "That's enough, otherwise you won't keep it down." He holds a cup to my lips. "Peppermint tea." With his help, I drink half the mug, and then he cautiously settles me back down onto the ground. "Get some more rest."

I curl up inside the sleeping bag, warmed through and through. Nearby, I hear Brendan working on something. I haven't even asked him where we are, or how he got all of this stuff here. And I haven't asked him what happens next, either. I don't want to ask, because everything still feels too nice. For a few more hours, I don't have to do anything but focus on the moment and enjoy the warmth, without worrying about what happens when we get back. Right at this moment, we're just Lou and Bren, a boy who saved a girl from freezing to death.

But there's one thing I can't wait to ask. "Bren... the drops, were they... bad?"

The working noises stop. "I'm okay."

"You sound tired, though."

"Of course I'm tired. But not from the drops. Now go to sleep already, or you'll find out what they're like." A couple more clanking sounds, then silence. "I was joking about that."

"I know." Contentment spreads through me, and it isn't long before sleep overtakes me in a massive, unstoppable wave.

When I open my eyes again, the sky is a brilliant blue, dotted with pale-yellow and pink clouds. The fresh, clear scent of spruce needles is in the air, and the air seems to be starting to warm. I lift my head and rotate it to the right. Brendan is kneeling in front of a dark-green backpack, rummaging through it. He smiles briefly when he notices that I'm awake, but goes right on doing whatever it is he's doing. Grey, on the other hand, bounds over and licks my face happily, barking and howling.

I straighten up, blinking sleepily. Those questions I didn't ask last night are lurking at the edge of my mind, but even now, I'm not

quite ready to think about the end of our story. I think my rational brain understands that it would overwhelm me, and as I look around, I actually manage to push the questions to the back of my mind.

We're still by the pale-green river, but in a much broader part of the valley. The mountains are further apart, standing majestically at the horizon, their peaks veiled by pink clouds as though they were well-kept secrets. The gravel along the riverbanks has given way to a carpet of grey-green weeds and silvery grass framed by short conifers. Everything seems untouched here, frozen in time for eternity, like this part of nature has never heard of the other, louder world.

"It's a special kind of peace and quiet, isn't it?" Brendan must have been watching me take in the scenery. "Out here, it's as if nothing and no one can hurt you."

I nod, realizing all over again how terribly hurt he must have been if he thinks he's only safe when completely isolated from other humans. "Where are we?"

He merely smiles and takes a pair of jeans and a sweater out of his backpack.

"Bren. Where are we?"

"Somewhere in Canada." He tosses me the clothes. "Put those on, and then we'll take care of your foot. Oh... right, sorry, I forgot to bring dry underwear."

I'm just glad he brought me clothes at all. Even so, it annoys me that he refuses to tell me where we are. Carefully, half-hidden by the sleeping bag, I wriggle into the pants, and then peel off the dark-blue fleece jacket so I can tug on the oversized beige sweater. A chill shoots through my limbs, and I'm relieved when I finally get the jacket on again.

I peer around at my immediate surroundings. There's a neatly rolled tarp beside the sleeping bag; long pieces of driftwood have been sunk vertically into the gravel, and just beyond my feet are several large rocks about the same height as the driftwood. So it was a tarp Brendan put up, not a tent. I glance over at him. Now he's kneeling near the fire, extinguishing it with dirt and stones. I

discover the pot I ate from last night, dangling from the backpack by a cord, sparkling clean.

"How did you get all this stuff?" I ask.

He scatters a few more handfuls of earth onto the embers. "When I woke up, you were gone," he says in a slightly accusatory tone. "I knew you wouldn't survive out there by yourself. Your escape plan was pure insanity!" He reaches for a bowl sitting near the campfire and hands it to me. "You should eat before we go. It's still warm. And there's more tea in the Thermos."

I take the spoon out of the bowl of oatmeal and start shoveling the creamy mass into my mouth like a starving person. I wonder if he's mad. He hasn't mentioned it yet, but maybe it was just to spare me the worst when I was half-dead. He might put the chain on me as soon as I finish eating.

There could be another possibility, though. I realize I can't ignore the question any longer. I'd never thought I'd ever find a way to change his mind, to get him to agree to let me go. But when he drank that knockout potion of his in order to protect me, it gave me a tiny glimmer of hope. I've been ignoring it, but it's still there, in my subconscious.

I glance discreetly at Brendan. He's squatting beside me, regarding me attentively, as if trying to figure out what I'm thinking about.

"I went back to the camper and got Grey," he finally says in response to my question from earlier.

"But how did you find me the first time? By the cliff, I mean?"

"I figured you'd follow the creek. No shortage of drinking water, and you're guaranteed not to go in circles." He picks up the tarp and ties it to the outside of the backpack. "When you ran away from the cliff, I went back for Grey so that he could find you. I knew there was a storm coming..."

"So you just packed everything a person needs to survive and started searching..."

"Killer of the Unprepared."

"What?"

"That's what they call death by hypothermia. Happens to a few tourists up here every year. Wind, rain, and temperatures under forty are the perfect conditions." Bren narrows his eyes. "What were you thinking? Stumbling through the wilderness at night, and then crossing the river... I thought you couldn't swim!" He shakes his head in disbelief.

"I can't," I reply quietly. "But what choice did I have?"

He rubs his face like he's trying to wipe an emotion away before it can build. "None, I guess. Apparently I'm more frightening than death." His voice sounds hard, but there's a defiant note in there, too. He goes on packing. "I fed Grey already. I'll just bandage your foot and then I'll bring you back."

A hard knot forms in the pit of my stomach as reality sinks its claws into me, and all of the thoughts I was trying to suppress come flooding back into my head at the same time. "Back?" I ask hoarsely. "Back where?"

He stops short. "To the camper, where else?" He avoids my eyes as he says it.

"Oh, of course," I mumble. There's a boulder on my chest. I feel tears start to form in my eyes, but I quickly swallow them. How could I have thought for a single moment that he might understand what it means to care about another person? If he really, truly liked me, he'd let me go. If he actually loved me, if I were actually the most important thing in the world to him, he would know that he can't keep me imprisoned without destroying me. He's obsessed with me, that's all. It doesn't matter how much or how little I care about him. He's never going to let me go. Never. Never. Never.

"Lou?"

The sudden gentleness of his voice burns. Why doesn't he understand what he's doing? How can he whisper my name so lovingly while he's being so terribly cruel? My cheeks are wet with the tears I was trying so hard to hold back.

"You thought the fact that I drank that stuff meant things would change, hm?"

I nod. There's no point in pretending around him.

"I'm sorry." He sounds so genuine, it makes me want to scream. "I wish I could let you go. I wish I could do it in order to prove to you how much you mean to me."

"Just do it, then!"

"I can't."

"M-maybe... maybe someday?"

"I drank that stuff because I was a danger to you. I was in the middle of a flashback, and anything was better than hurting you. At that moment, even losing you would have been better than knowing that I'd done something to you, or that you'd fallen to your death because of me."

"Maybe someday? Bren... please, just tell me... someday? Maybe? Someday?"

He smiles sadly, but doesn't reply, and I don't have the courage to repeat the question. I'm too scared to hear the no.

Silently, Brendan takes the gauze out of the backpack, then kneels in front of me and bandages my ankle. His fingers are strong and warm on my skin, and I have an urge to grab his hand and hold it there, so that I can feel human touch again. I know that what I probably ought to do is punch him and spit at him, but after last night, I know how much I long to be held. I miss Jay pinching my side affectionately, I miss Liam and Avery's hugs, I even miss Ethan's admonishing hand on my shoulder. I miss everything. And if I ever get back home, I'll never contradict Ethan again, I'll come home on time every night and do all my math homework. I wonder why it is that I'm only realizing how precious those things were now, after I've lost them. The little things. Watching TV together, eating dinner together, laughing together on the veranda...

"All right, there you go." Brendan tapes the bandage in place and looks at me. His face is blurry through my tears. My shoulders are shaking. After a while, I feel his hand on my cheek. Soft and rough. Hot and cold. Bitter and sweet. He wipes the streaked tears from my face, as if it will erase my pain. *Oh, God, please tell me you're going to let me go. Just say it already!*

"Maybe could mean never, and someday could be in ten years. So... okay, Lou. Maybe someday. Maybe someday. But don't ever ask

me about it again.”

I take a deep breath and burst out sobbing in the same moment. I press my lips together tightly, but it doesn’t help. I suddenly have a lot more crying to do.

CHAPTER 20

I'm clinging to Brendan's back like a monkey, arms wrapped tightly around his neck. My sweatshirt is sticking to his sweaty T-shirt, but he's forbidden me from taking it off, to make sure I get properly warmed one more time. He's got the backpack full of our stuff slung across his stomach, and once in a while he even puts Grey on top of it, so that only his head is peeking out. I'm not sure how he can take a single step carrying this much weight. We've been at this for hours; the sun's already past its zenith, but Brendan hasn't allowed himself a single break, just keeps right on going at a merciless tempo, not making any concessions to my throbbing head. At some point, I slump forward and rest my cheek against my upper arm. Brendan's hair tickles my ear, sending tingles down my spine. Part of me's completely exhausted. And I don't mean only physically, though there's not an inch of my body that doesn't hurt after this torturous experience. It's something to do with Brendan. I don't have the strength to fight my feelings for him anymore. And I definitely don't want to start wondering whether what he said earlier was a real promise, or whether he was trying to make me feel better. I can't, I absolutely can't deal with any of it. The fact that I have feelings for him despite everything he's doing to me is so completely insane that just thinking about the massive, gaping hole between those two extremes makes me want to throw in the towel.

I let my mind drift unmoored, settle into the warmth of Brendan's body and his even stride, and watch the landscape change. The gravel gradually gives way to sand, and lush yellow and violet flowers soon emerge amid the grey-green weeds and silvery grass. Fluffy, white umbels of yarrow bloom at the edge of the forest, and grey birds are fluttering around everywhere in search of mosquitos and dragonflies. Beside us, on the river that's gradually turning into a dark-blue lake, a group of loons is following us like they're trying to figure out where we're going. Brendan said he knew a spot where we could cross the water and get to the top again, but it would take days to get there. I hope it takes forever, because beneath this endless sky, I feel weirdly free—its sheer vastness almost makes all of my troubles seem less significant by comparison.

When we finally stop to rest, I'm relieved to hear Brendan say that he didn't make it as far as he was hoping to. He sets me down, and I watch him spread out the sleeping bag and collect wood for the campfire. He doesn't find enough driftwood nearby, so he disappears into the forest, and I don't see or hear him for a long time. He leaves me there with an old can filled with rocks so that I can make noise and scare bears away. It doesn't seem to occur to him that I might run off again. Well, of course it doesn't—he's faster than I am, especially now that I'm injured so badly that I can barely walk.

Later, he whittles himself a birchwood spear and uses it to catch salmon in the shallows, which he roasts over the open fire for us.

I'm starting to feel more like myself again, both physically and mentally, as though I was frozen to the depths of my soul and I'm beginning to thaw again. Brendan gives me his thick down jacket to wear and helps me onto the sleeping bag before sitting in the sand beside me.

The salmon's delicious. We eat in silence, and then just sit there for a while. The night air is as soft and cool as silk, and the full moon overhead casts a dreamy, silvery light over the mountains and treetops. Its perfect reflection sits atop the water, a huge, gleaming diamond flanked by an army of stars. The sight of the moon and the chirping cicadas fill me with the deep sense of peace and

contentment I've been yearning for. I can feel myself relaxing. Everything is fine, I don't need to be afraid of anything, not of Brendan, not of my feelings. Not out here. The millions of twinkling lights, both in the lake and in the sky, make me believe in something bigger. Maybe it was my destiny that Brendan kidnapped me. Maybe a higher power brought us together, a power I can't possibly fight against.

With the down jacket draped across my shoulders, I limp to the water and carefully ease myself into a sitting position on the gravel. My gaze sweeps across the lake, to the silent, solemn forest on the far side. After a while, Brendan comes over and sits next to me. I draw my knees in and regard the rocks along the shore, frosted in green moss. My feet, in Brendan's oversized socks, look like foreign objects beside them.

"This is your land, right?" I look at him.

He nods, surprised. "How'd you figure that out?"

"I saw a sign. Private property, no trespassing." I've been wondering all day why I didn't realize it until I saw that wooden sign. It explains why Brendan wasn't the least bit worried that someone might see us at the waterfall, like a tourist or whoever.

"Legally, it doesn't belong to me." Brendan toys idly with a rock. "I'm the leaseholder." He nods toward the see. "That's why I'm allowed to hunt and fish here. Otherwise it'd be illegal—environmental protection and so on."

"So you rented this whole area? How much land are we talking about here?"

"I forget the exact size. I know the boundaries, that's all I care about."

A memory flashes through my mind. I see me and Brendan standing by the camper in that mysterious evening light, right before he knocked me out. "When you said you spent the whole summer traveling... you were always here, on this land of yours?"

He nods.

"How many summers?"

"Three."

I think back to a conversation that feels like it happened a thousand years ago, even though it probably hasn't been very long at all. "You've been coming here since you accidentally killed that guy."

He gives me a serious look. "You're quick."

"I don't have much else to think about when I'm not trying to plot an escape."

He doesn't acknowledge the last part. He just crosses his legs and rests his elbows on them. His face takes on a distant look. "I guess I wanted to get away. To leave everything behind. To forget everything."

I regard him thoughtfully from the side. "What do you mean, 'everything'?" This time I'm not asking so I can understand him better. I'm asking because I find it interesting. I find him interesting.

"Fights. Life in the slums."

I swallow. "You're from the slums?"

He raises his eyes and casts a melancholy glance in my direction. "Not originally. I fled to the slums. And then, yeah, I lived there for a couple years."

I'm not sure what to say to that. If he was fleeing *to* the slums, the place he was coming *from* must have been hell. "So where are you from, then?" I ask cautiously.

"Los Angeles. I was twelve when I finally managed to run away from home. I'd tried a bunch of times, but the police kept finding me. Eventually, I realized I'd be safer in the slums, because not even the cops wanted to go there."

"Safe in the slums?" I shake my head. "That's as crazy as crossing a river when you can't swim."

"I see the parallel, yeah." His short, strangely painful laugh shatters the stillness of the night. We lapse into silence again, and I go back to staring out at the moon reflected in the lake. A group of ducks swims past, a safe distance from the shore.

It takes me a minute to screw up the courage to ask my next question. "So what were those fights, exactly? Were they always for money?"

He nods. "A fight scout discovered me."

"A what?"

"They sort of spy on street fights and stuff to pick out the strongest guys and recruit them for the underground fighting circuit. There's a lot of money in it. Tons of money." He picks up a handful of gravel and starts tossing it into the water, piece by piece. "It's different from regular MMA. There are no rules, except that you can't use weapons. Which is why it's illegal—there are no limits. People bet massive amounts of money... and only the winner decides what happens to the loser."

I furrow my brow, baffled. "What do you mean? What happens to them?"

Brendan grimaces. "You mean besides the risk of getting killed in the fight?"

I nod silently. I'm still trying to work this new information into my understanding of Brendan. Fleeing into the slums, that's nuts, right? As nuts as testing knockout drops on yourself!

"There are a few popular traditions..." He glances at me and then away. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

I decide not to push it. "Have you ever lost?"

He rubs his face. "No," he says quietly.

"Never?" I raise an eyebrow in disbelief.

"Never."

"Which is why you could afford to lease this land."

"It's illegal money. I've got a guy who washes it for me."

"Oh..."

His eyes darken when he looks at me. "I'm not a good person. I told you."

I hold his gaze. "Have you ever decided to make something terrible happen to a guy after you beat him in a fight?"

"Never. I swear."

"Must have been awful, living that way," I remark softly.

He shakes his head. "Not for me. Violence and poverty, they were both better than what I'd been living in."

For the first time, I start thinking it might actually be better not to stir up his traumatic past. I try not to let it show how much this story is affecting me, because from what I know of him, pity is the

last thing he wants. “So you quit once you had enough money, I guess?” I ask, making an effort to sound composed.

Brendan nods. “When I was eighteen, I rented myself a proper apartment. But I would have kept on living that life if that... incident hadn’t happened. That was when I realized what I was doing.” He sighs deeply. “I never wanted to kill anyone else, but I didn’t care one way or the other about my own life.”

“You didn’t care about your own life?” I echo, not sure why I’m surprised to hear it after everything else I’ve learned about him.

“I had nothing to live for.” He stares at the shimmering surface of the lake. “Maybe that was why I was so good. Fighting didn’t scare me at all. I risked everything, every time. Death was always an acceptable option. I never really came out of the darkness... until I found you.”

He turns his face toward me. The deep sadness in his expression is like nothing I’ve ever known in my own life. I wish I could erase all of that for him, so that he can break free of his past. Suddenly, I want to know everything. Everything about him, and everything about him and me.

“When was that?” I hasten to ask before he can decide he’s revealed enough about himself. I can’t let him slip away from me now.

“About a year ago.” He smiles, like he’s glad to hear the question, not scared like I’d have expected. He picks up another handful of gravel and closes his fist around it, as if it were memories he was clinging to. “Three years ago, I moved out of my apartment and bought the camper. I just drove off, all I cared about was getting away, and I had enough money to make it happen. After a month, I landed here, and I stayed the whole summer.”

“What about in winter?”

“I spent the first two winters in a small town, and last winter here. There’s an old log cabin on the property, right by the lake. It’s small, but it’s enough to survive.”

“Why didn’t you bring me there?”

He smiles again. “I’m going to.”

I swallow hard, glancing down at the fistful of gravel in his hand.

"It's too cold to live in the camper in winter," he adds. "You asked about that a while ago, remember?"

"Yeah, of course." Back when I found the supplies.

"It's right by the lake, you can only get there on foot. It's pretty far away, even more isolated than here. I spent four months there last winter."

I can hardly begin to imagine what kind of life that was. "Had you already found me then?"

"I had a laptop. The Internet connection was pretty bad—I only got a couple of hours a day, and the generator kept going on the fritz from the cold. But winter here was an absolute paradise. I sat there thinking about how I'd show it to you one day."

I picture Brendan sitting alone in a snow-covered cottage, looking at my summer photos. The thought doesn't scare me to death the way it used to.

"When the lake by the cabin freezes, you can hear it singing itself to sleep. For days on end, these haunting melodies fill the cove—like whale song, like a giant blowing across glass bottles. And then these high, crystalline glass-harp tones... and noises like enormous water droplets falling onto the floor of a cave. And the fog is an army of ghosts dancing across the ice in time to the music, and the wolves howl in the background."

"Sounds pretty," I grudgingly admit. "And kind of spooky."

Brendan's expression turns dreamy. "Around the winter solstice, the sun is so low in the sky that it casts shadows two hundred feet long, turning the twinkling ice crystals to ruby-red glitter dust. And when the first snow falls, it reflects the moon and the stars and lights up the night." He looks at me again, and I can't help imagining him, tall and dark, walking across a frozen white sea, his endless black shadow trailing behind him like coattails. "This place gave me peace and security. Up here, I could breathe again, I finally stopped having nightmares every time I went to sleep. But I was also alone."

I take the hand he's clutching the gravel in, holding it between both of my own. "Didn't you ever have friends? Or a girl you liked?"

"Relationships leave you vulnerable to abandonment. I can't stand being abandoned, so I put up walls."

“But you don’t have them up around me?” I open his fingers, and the gravel tumbles to the ground. His empty hand lies there stiffly between mine like a dead man’s, like maybe he’s afraid to move it.

“No,” he whispers.

“Why not?” I whisper back.

“Because I made sure you can’t leave me, so I don’t have to protect myself as much. The minute I saw you, everything was different. It was like I could see things through your eyes... life and stuff, I mean. You were a ray of sunshine in a dark cave.” He takes a deep breath and tries to clench his hand into a fist, but I hold it tight to keep him from doing it. “If I could go back, I’d do everything differently.” He swallows hard, returning the pressure of my fingers. “I wouldn’t kidnap you, I wouldn’t drug you... I wouldn’t touch you... but it’s too late, I can’t go back. I don’t want to lose you. Especially not now that I’ve gotten to know you. At first I just hoped you could make me happy. Now I know you do.”

I want to cry. This is all too much for me. Brendan and his story. Brendan and the singing ice. Brendan and me. It’s like I’m being torn in two. Half of me is pulling Brendan in, the other half is pushing him away. But the truth is, I don’t want to push him away anymore. I want to pull him toward me, to feel the way my heart races when he puts his arms around me and holds me close. I want to know how those unrelenting lips feel on mine, what his tongue tastes like. I want him to press me down onto the sand on my back, so that I don’t see or hear anything but him. I want him to fill every inch of me and never stop.

But he promised not to touch me, so if I want him, I have to take the first step. And I can’t. The divide between us feels way too wide to jump across. Because if I jump, there’s no going back. Everything will change, and I’m not sure I’m ready for that.

I watch him from the side as he stares toward a point in the distance. Looking at him, I feel something like homesickness, but I’m not sure why.

“Bren.” I release his hand gently. “I don’t think you’re a bad person.”

He gazes at me. His eyes are as lonely as the land around us.

"Besides kidnapping me, I mean."

He smiles, but it's not a smile of agreement. It's a smile that could also be tears. At that moment, I realize that I believe him. If he could do it all over, he wouldn't kidnap me, he would ask me out.

Later that evening, he carries the backpack into the woods and hangs it in a tree so the scent of our food won't draw any bears. After that, he sets up his own bed for the night, next to my sleeping bag. As much as I'm longing for him, I'm also relieved that he doesn't join me in the sleeping bag, because I'm way too agitated to handle that kind of physical closeness. Either he senses it, or he's just keeping his promise about not touching me. Even Grey leaves me in peace tonight, and settles down near the fire beside Bren.

I lie there wide awake for a long time, watching the countless stars pulse above me—the entire sky is flickering with their light, creating a magical dimension between light and darkness. The longer I spend looking at it, the more lost I feel. I'm not sure what to feel anymore, what's right.

"Lou?" Brendan suddenly whispers. "You still awake?"

"Yeah."

"You always wanted something to happen, right?"

My pulse immediately begins racing. "How do you mean?" I ask, already starting to suspect the answer. I keep my eyes fixed on the stars.

"I told you once that there was a second reason why I kidnapped you." He pauses. "You wanted something to tear you out of your life and lift you up into the air like an eagle. You wanted something to turn you inside out, leaving you a completely different person, unrecognizable. You wanted something to make your heart light up... isn't that about how you put it?"

I can't respond. The seconds tick by. I lie there, stiff as a board, waiting for the stars to come crashing down onto me.

"I just wanted you to know that, Lou."

And I want to laugh and cry and scream all at the same time, but I don't do any of those. I can't move.

Suddenly, a gleaming red veil flutters across the sky, like a goddess's scarf, curling and billowing as though drifting on some invisible wind. The stars abruptly disappear.

"Northern lights," Brendan says quietly. He sits up, but I stay lying there, I can't help it. I stare up at the sky, hypnotized, watching a sea of fiery red light gather around us, illuminating everything. The edges of the sea tremble, and tendrils of it break free and soar away like phoenixes. I get goose bumps down my back, not from the cold this time. Soon the sea above us shifts into a series of deep-red bands, arching as far as the eye can see. Near the horizon, a pale-pink fog swims over the mountaintops; green light flows into the swirling red, which is gradually turning to deep violet. I'm breathless with awe. I've never seen anything so magnificent, so beautiful. The patterns transform again and again, bathing everything in shimmering hues for minutes on end. Finally, different-colored rays spread in every direction; the violet dissipates, leaving behind the pale, clear green. It flits across the sky like a gentle, dreamy whisper, and then wafts away.

My heart is pounding. It's like I've had a spell cast on me. The stars reappear. I look over at Brendan, who's standing at the lakeshore, head tilted way back. The magical display we've just witnessed almost feels like some kind of sign. I look up again.

You wanted something to happen...

Light and darkness blur together overhead. Maybe right and wrong aren't as far apart as I always thought. Maybe they really are simply two sides of the same coin. Otherwise, how would what Brendan did feel so right and so wrong at the same time?

When I wake up the next morning, everything's still. I feel the cool air on my cheeks, and I sit up, yawning. Grey immediately comes bounding over with a joyful yelp, and I scritch his furry ears absentmindedly as I think about last night, about the northern lights and about all the things Brendan and I said. I'm still slightly dazed, but it's a nice feeling, one I wouldn't mind holding onto for a while. Still lost in thought, I glance over at Brendan. He's lying on his side

with his face buried in the crook of his elbow, seemingly still asleep. I don't want to wake him... after all, he's the one who has to carry me the entire day.

Silently, I stand up, grab the pot, and hobble to the lake to fetch water. My ankle stings with every step I take, but it's better than it was yesterday. I kneel at the shore, where tendrils of fog are billowing up from the smooth surface of the water, enveloping the sky in the same otherworldly magic that I sense inside myself. The mountains are glowing a hazy orange red, like the ridge on the back of a burning dragon. The image makes me think of one of Jayden's old stories. I dip the pot into the water, wondering what my brothers are up to right now. Is Avery making scrambled eggs this morning? Is Ethan reading the paper? Is Liam balancing underneath the apple tree again, while Jayden hammers away at his computer keyboard? A strange pain wells up within me, but it's totally different from how it was at the beginning, almost like a beautiful piece of jewelry behind glass. Have they gotten over losing me, or was it too much for one of them to bear? Are they back to their old routines yet? I'm not sure why I'm thinking about them now, of all times. Maybe because I feel so estranged from them right now, as though they were characters in a story. Like that girl whose deepest desire was to turn some potatoes blue so she could get into some stupid club. I can barely remember that girl. I do remember the little girl in the white nightshirt, though. It feels like she and I have a lot more in common.

I reach for my pendant, but even before my hand closes around emptiness, I know I've lost it. It's somewhere in the wilderness, amid the nettles and the willow herb.

Despite this dreamy feeling I have, tears still spring to my eyes—partly from the loss itself, partly because I didn't even notice it until now, which strikes me as a kind of betrayal. Is having feelings for Brendan making me care less about my brothers? No, of course not. I love each one of them as much as ever, and until two days ago, I wanted nothing in the world more than to get back home... except so much has happened in the meantime. Not just that I nearly froze

to death, either. It's like I'm a totally different person inside. Which makes it seem like a whole lot more time has passed.

I scoop the pot out of the water and stand up, blinking back tears. When I get a chance, I decide, I'm going to have to ask Brendan if I can let my brothers know I'm alive. That would make a lot of things so much easier to bear. I don't know why I never thought of it before.

Just as I'm about to leave, I spot a mother elk and two calves on the opposite shore of the lake. My heart starts pounding nervously, despite the fact that I know they can't do anything to me. She's looking straight at me as she plucks at a single willow tree to break off a thin twig. Chewing, she sizes me up as if trying to decide whether I could pose a potential threat to her babies.

The moment she lets me out of her sight, Grey comes barreling up from behind me, making a ridiculous racket—barking, yelping, yowling, somewhere between wolf and dog noises. Immediately, Brendan jumps to his feet and hurries over after him.

"Mama elk and two calves," I tell him, even though he's got two perfectly good eyes.

"Hm." He knits his brow thoughtfully, but doesn't look at me. "I wonder if we should start keeping Grey on a leash. Don't want him scaring the animals."

"But wolves belong in the wilderness," I retort, watching the elk retreat into the thicket.

"Exactly." Brendan trudges off, and then it hits me: he's afraid that Grey will leave us.

The sun rises and sets, rises and sets. My sense of time is officially gone for good. It might be September already. Maybe school has already started again in Ash Springs, except without me. I wonder if Ava and Madison still think about me. Or Elizabeth and Emma. Out here, all of that seems a million miles away. The only real things here are me, Brendan, Grey, the river, the trees, and the huge, clear sky.

A tender intimacy is developing between me and Brendan, along with something I can't quite put into words. It's everywhere, between the things we say and the things we don't. It's in the looks we exchange and the glances we steal, in the accidental touches and the necessary ones. It's in the air around us, and even when we sleep, it floats over us like a finely spun web, like a dream catcher. It's huge and powerful, but infinitely vulnerable as well. One wrong word, one badly phrased remark, and it could evaporate. It reminds me of Grey, the boy in Jayden's story, and the names he gave the stars. Speak them aloud, and they'll shatter like glass.

By the time we stop to rest today, it's already late afternoon. We've found a perfect spot to camp: a tiny cove by the lake, just big enough for a campfire and a spot to bed down, framed by a semicircle of dark spruces, slim birches, and one gigantic weeping willow whose silvery-green branches dip into the water as though they're drinking.

Brendan's already built a crackling fire out of a few rotting branches, and I'm boiling our drinking water over it while he searches the forest for more firewood. Once I've fed Grey, he bounds off after Brendan. I can hear the two of them poking through the underbrush. Brendan says something to Grey, who replies with a single bark.

While I wait, I explore our campsite a bit, and discover a couple of raspberry bushes beside the willow tree. Raspberry leaves make good tea—Brendan showed me that yesterday—so I bring a cloth bag over to the bush and start carefully picking leaves, along with the occasional berry.

I need to hurry. The sky is already bathed in the embers of the setting sun, trailing a veil of small, dark clouds.

I'm so deep in thought that I barely register the soft splashing in the distance. Must be from that group of loons. At the back of my mind, I realize that it sounds different, more rhythmic. But there are so many other water birds I don't even know... or it could be otters.

As I’m gathering the cloth bag at the top to knot it closed, I hear voices.

At first, I think I must have imagined them, but then the water washes another swell of chatter and laughter over to me.

I freeze mid-motion. My whole body goes numb, and the bag slips from my hands. Now I understand what that rhythmic splashing is: oars hitting the water and being lifted out again. My mind is completely blank for several seconds, although I finally manage to remember how to move. I take two or three mechanical steps toward the shore, until I’m just behind the hanging willow branches.

They’re still far away, gliding with the current through the dark-blue water. Three canoes, two men in each. They’re not speaking my language—Germans, maybe?—but I bet they’d understand “Help” and “Kidnapped.”

CHAPTER 21

I open my mouth to shout, but nothing comes out. Several seconds pass. Now they're almost next to me, but they haven't spotted me yet. My mind is racing; everything's crashing in on me at once. Here I am, I want to call. I even picture each syllable in my head. But I remain silent, watching one part of myself wrestle with another. They're strong-looking guys, and there are six of them. I'm sure they would be able to overpower Brendan, no matter how strong of a fighter he is. Images flicker through my head for a fraction of a second: Brendan hog-tied on the ground, Brendan lying helpless in the canoe, Brendan on trial. Brendan in a cell. Locked up alone in the dark. *So dark...* My feet get icy, and I realize I'm standing in the water. The sound of the men's jovial laughter drifts across the lake again, and one of the canoes rocks back and forth. Silently, I sidle around the hanging willow branches, moving along with the boats. Now I see new images in my mind: Ethan's haggard face, the grief in his eyes. I feel his broken heart like it's my own. My chest is burning now, and the pressure in my lungs is building and building, because I'm holding my breath so desperately. I have to scream. Right now.

Help! I press a hand tightly over my mouth to stifle the yell rising in my throat. No matter what I do, I'm a traitor. I'm going to hurt someone either way. My heart is racing; the blood is rushing in my

ears. This might be my very last chance to change things. Maybe could mean never and someday could be in ten years.

You promised Ethan!

I take a step forward, letting my hand drop. *Scream*, I beg myself, but I don't. I can't. I just stand there. My eyes are burning. *Do it already!*

Then a hand clamps over my mouth. Hard. I'm being dragged behind the willow again, watching the branches part on either side of me like the loose strings on a beaded curtain.

"Not. One. Sound." Brendan's voice is rough against my ear. He's holding me so tightly that I can't move, and for a minute I'm back in the past, reliving the moment he put the chloroformed rag to my face. Instinctively, I start wriggling, kicking water up around us. I bite my lip and taste blood.

"Stop," he whispers, tightening his grip. He's not really hurting me, but something still shatters inside me. I quit resisting, realizing it's pointless to even try. I'll never have a chance against him. Nothing will ever change. He's my kidnapper, I'm his hostage. How could I have possibly seen it any differently? Tears burn in my throat, heavy and hot, but I don't want to cry. I could have screamed, I could have ended all of this. I knew how he was. Is. But I didn't want to ruin this thing between us, and now he's hurt me more deeply than anyone ever has.

Far in the distance, I can barely make out the splashing and the soft confusion of voices, but soon the landscape swallows it all. The silence returns like a living creature back from a prowl, but Brendan still doesn't release me.

Time slows to a crawl, stretching on and on. Time enough for me to truly understand what I've done, or haven't done. Time enough for me to realize that I may have officially thrown my whole life away. But here's the crazy thing: it doesn't feel like I have.

When Brendan finally lets me go and my feet are firmly planted on the lake bed again, it's like waking up from a surreal dream. Now anything could happen. Anything at all.

Cautiously, I put some distance between us, not turning to face him until I'm several paces away. He's standing there in his cargo

pants and that dark sweatshirt, hands balled into fists. There's a tortured expression on his ghostly-pale face, like someone's just beaten him up and he's trying not to let on how much pain he's in.

"You didn't have to do that," I say in a shaky voice.

"Afraid I did," he whispers weakly.

"Did *not*!" I shout with such force that he actually flinches. "I wouldn't have screamed." As helpless as he looks, my first instinct is to punch him in the face, to hurt him the way he's hurting me. "If I'd wanted to, I'd have done it," I blurt out. "I had plenty of time before you yanked me away like I was just the goddamn prey you're so obsessed with."

He stares at me for several long seconds, eyes widening. "You wouldn't have screamed?" he echoes. "I don't understand... why? I mean... that was your chance... wasn't it?" He shakes his head, looking dazed. "Lou," he says in a pleading tone, like a guy who's stumbled onto another planet and doesn't know the rules. "Why not?"

I want to hit him because he doesn't realize how important he is to me, because he doesn't get that I did this for him. I want to burst into tears because he didn't give me a chance to prove it. He probably has no idea how hard that was for me just now. For his sake, I've decided never to eat Avery's scrambled eggs again, never to study with Ethan again, never to bug Liam again while he's standing on one leg looking all solemn. For his sake, I've decided I'll never read another one of Jayden's stories. For his sake, my brothers will go on suffering, and that tears my heart to shreds.

I stare at him, speechless.

Brendan presses his lips together. It looks like tears are about to start rolling down his cheeks any minute. "I screwed everything up again..." He takes a step toward me. "When I heard them... I thought they were going to take you away from me. There were six of them." He stops and covers his face with his hands. "I thought that was it, I was going to lose you forever... why didn't you call for help? I don't get it... Lou... why not?"

I can see how hard his hands are shaking. Only now do I truly understand how vulnerable he really is. His past is etched so deeply

into his soul that he can't get it out on his own. He's a moth with charred wings, flapping around in the net of his past, twisting and turning and making everything worse for himself. He doesn't have the strength to fight it anymore, because he's been doing it his whole life. The truth is that he's weak and I'm strong.

That realization is probably what allows me to approach him now, even in all my despair. I've just chosen him over everything else, and I can't start questioning that decision based on how he's reacting to this situation. This whole experience has simply shown us who we are and how we are. It's shown me how much power our pasts have over us, whether we love our pasts or hate them.

I take another step toward him. "You want to know why I didn't call for help?" It comes out sounding more confrontational than I feel.

He nods, lowering his hands.

I'm standing right in front of him, and I risk a smile despite my grief, or maybe because of it. I know that if I don't jump now, I'll never do it, and then I may as well have screamed. All of my fears and doubts flare up one more time, and the terror I've always felt in his presence returns with such force that my knees turn to rubber, going so weak that I'm afraid I may lose my footing, and I know Brendan's the only person who can take my fears away from me. By holding me.

I take the final step, wrap my arms around his neck, and rest my head on his chest. My entire body is shaking. For a few moments, he stands there, frozen, but then I feel his arms encircle my waist cautiously, almost like he's not sure how to do it, or like he's afraid he might accidentally break me. I don't know how long we stand there, holding each other, trembling and overwhelmed. I can feel his heart racing through his shirt, and his ragged breath ruffles my hair. My emotions are a confused jumble, but the fear fades away until all I feel are Brendan's arms around me. Careful. Tender. Comforting. Only now do I realize how badly I wished this would happen. It feels the way I always thought it would feel the moment I came home again. I let my tears flow.

After a while, I raise my head to look at him. “Do you know why now?” I ask with a soft sob.

In response, he pulls me in close, holding me so tightly that no power on Earth could ever separate our bodies. I gasp and lay my hands on his cheeks. His lips brush my forehead, my eyelids, the tip of my nose, and then find my mouth. A hot-and-cold shiver races through me. I kiss him back, realizing I’m losing myself. I’ve made the jump, there’s no turning back now, not ever. I taste his lips, feel his tongue sliding softly into my mouth. I’m falling and flying at the same time. My legs give out; he lifts me up, and I wrap them around his hips, running my hands through his hair and pressing myself even more tightly against him. I want to feel him all over, I want him to fill me completely, I want him inside me.

We break off for a moment, gasping for air. Our eyes meet, and his are full of such longing that it almost breaks my heart. I can’t believe this is the same Brendan I first met. I can’t believe any of this.

I’m not sure how, but somehow we land on the small patch of sand at the foot of the willow, surrounded by its hanging branches. He’s lying on top of me, kissing me, while his hand steals underneath my shirt and strokes my breast.

Suddenly, he stops. “Maybe... maybe we should wait...” he murmurs, giving me a look that’s tender and searching, yet full of desire. It’s flickering in his eyes like flames, though he’s making an effort to hide it. “Maybe after everything that happened, you’re too confused to know what you want.”

“No,” I whisper. “No... I’m not confused. I’m just sad because I can’t have everything.”

A look of realization forms on his face, and he tries to move away, but I pull him down to me and kiss him before he can protest. He tastes so good, like salt and dirt and fresh sweat, mingled with the sadness that always seems to surround him. I never want to let him go again. I feel his hesitation, but I take it away from him by sucking on his tongue, circling it until he can’t hold back any longer, until his desire mirrors mine.

Soon he pulls away to remove his shirt, and then slides mine over my head. Our pants follow.

When I feel his skin against mine, I want to scream with joy. And with pain. All of this is like a rush of a hundred million different colors. His lips on my collarbone, on my stomach, further down, much further down. His fingers in my hair, on my breasts gleaming with sweat, between my legs. My hands, discovering every inch of him. My whole world is standing still. Rain patters down somewhere in the background, but we're safely protected by the canopy of the willow; only the sand beneath us is damp. We barely notice. We don't feel the cold, we only feel each other. We forget everything, even who we are.

When I open my legs for him and take him inside me, a sharp pain jolts me out of the reverie. I gasp, and he stops, horrified. "Lou? Everything okay?" His hot breath on my sweaty face. "Does it hurt?"

"It's okay," I assure him, breathless, gazing into his eyes. "It'll pass in a minute."

He waits a moment longer before starting to move again, never taking his eyes off me. His face is right over mine. His eyes are full of astonishment, like he can't believe he's allowed to experience something so beautiful.

I slide my arms underneath his so that I can hold him as tightly as I can. The pain is ebbing. We move together, and it's like I'm melting in his hands, beneath his body. I feel him through and through, I feel things I never dreamed possible, I feel like I can never let go of him no matter what happens.

Then, without separating our bodies, he rolls onto his back and pulls me on top.

"Your turn," he whispers, breathing hard, and smiles at me.

I prop my hands to either side of him and regard him from above: the way his mussed hair falls on the sand, damp with rain and sweat; the glow on his face; his hard mouth, now soft; the angle of his collarbone. Our eyes meet again, and I'm suddenly bashful, not sure what to do.

He runs a gentle hand through my hair. “Don’t worry,” he says, “it comes naturally.” He presses his hands against my shoulders to take some of my weight. His lower body flexes upward.

I start moving instinctively, lifting my hips and letting them slide down again. Again and again. I feel the beat deep within me, like we’re musical instruments playing the same song. My blood courses through my veins. Drums pound in my ears, full and heavy. Brendan’s breathing in ragged gasps. He clutches my hips, thrusting into me, again and again. Everything is on fire, I don’t think I can take it. His nails dig into my butt, trying to hold me down, but that’s impossible. The drumming gets louder, faster and faster. I get faster and faster. Brendan gasps. My legs start to tremble. My vision blurs to a deep-blue night. Something explodes inside me, quaking in a new and unfamiliar place. Bright stars race toward me; I fly through them. I hear Brendan shout, and an electric current pulses through me, flooding me so sweetly that I gasp and whimper almost like I’m in pain. Everything spins and spins and spins.

I collapse against Brendan’s damp chest with a muted cry. He wraps his arms around me, breathing hard. His heartbeat thunders through me, filling me like we’re one body. He stays inside me as that dizzying feeling subsides, leaving in its wake a sweet, heavy exhaustion where only Brendan and I exist in the world.

We spend a long time lying there in silence, as if words might take the magic out of what we’ve just experienced—like one of those moments of reflection that follow a fantastic story. After an eternity, we finally separate, because the night air is chilly despite our body heat, and walk toward the fire hand in hand. We slip into the sleeping bag together, somehow incapable of not holding each other, like our bodies understand more about love than our minds.

After a while, before I’m fully aware of it, Brendan’s lying on top of me again.

“You’re so beautiful, Lou,” he whispers in a voice so full of tenderness, it’s like he’s been saving it up for this one moment. “I can finally tell you that without scaring you.” His lips brush mine. “I wish I could just stay right here forever. This place, this night.”

I stroke his cheek. “Same here,” I whisper.

"Lou?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm afraid no matter what I say, I'm going to ruin everything. It feels like this is a dream, and as soon as I say one wrong thing, I'll wake up from it."

I can sense his anxiety—a reflection of my own. But right now, at this moment, I can't imagine he's even capable of hurting me ever again.

"If you don't know what to say, you could just kiss me instead," I suggest, giggling.

Brendan holds me tightly. His pupils are so huge that I can't see any brown in them at all. "But if I start kissing you, I'll want you again. And that would probably hurt you... twice in a row..."

I draw his head down to mine. "If by 'hurting' me you mean what you did with me earlier, I'll allow it."

And then we do it again, so gently and tenderly this time that it spares my body but pains my soul.

When I wake up the next morning, we're lying the way we did that night that Brendan warmed me up: his body behind mine, his arms curled protectively around me. My limbs are heavier than usual, which is probably from last night, but I don't think my scratchy throat has anything to do with it.

I snuggle against him more closely, and he holds me tighter with a contented sigh. I wish I could just lie here with him forever, but Brendan wants to get an early start, because he wants to cover a lot of ground today.

It's barely dawn as we wriggle out of the sleeping bag and get dressed, and then do everything we usually do, except today we do them together. We're both afraid to talk, so we trust our bodies instead. It's like the rest of the magic is still hanging in the air, and we're clinging to it with all of our strength. We only say as much as we absolutely have to, we smile at each other whenever our eyes meet, we hold hands as often as our activities will allow. But then there are moments I catch Brendan staring out at nothing, probably

brooding over the same questions I am. As much as I hate to admit it, I know that decisions will need to be made. What happens when we get back to the camper? Will he keep on chaining me to the wall night after night, or will he start trusting me? And if he doesn't trust me, how will I react? Will I react the same way I did under the willow tree, when I told myself I can't regret my choice based on his reactions?

The more time passes, the longer I spend on Brendan's back, the more agitated I become. I'm wondering if I'll always love him. If I'll always be able to love him, or if eventually my rational mind will butt in and remind me of how much I've given up for him. At one especially anxious moment, I even wonder if I've just automatically fallen in love with my captor the way a lot of kidnapping victims do.

I'm getting uncomfortably hot, and all this thinking is starting to hurt my head.

"You're shivering." Brendan stops abruptly and glances back at me over his shoulder. "Are you cold?"

"A l-little," I stammer, suddenly realizing how wretched I feel. Talking makes my throat hurt like I've eaten too much sour candy.

Brendan carefully slides me to the ground. When he lets go so that he can get a better look at me, my legs turn to Jell-O and I stumble to one side. He quickly grabs me under one arm, using his free hand to touch my forehead. "You're burning up," he says. "You've got a fever."

"N-now what?" My teeth are chattering. I barely register that Brendan's setting me down somewhere and wrapping me in his warm, fluffy jacket. Then he pours some raspberry leaf tea from a Thermos into a cup and hands it to me to drink.

"Warmer now?" He sounds worried.

I nod. It's so nice of him to take care of me like this. When he treats me with this much kindness and talks to me in that gentle tone, all of my questions seem to disappear.

"You're still shivering, though." He gives me a stern look.

"No worries. Your back keeps me warm."

He furrows his brow skeptically. "I don't have anything with me for fevers. You think you can handle going another mile or two?"

I force myself to smile. “Sure.”

Once I’m on his back again, I rest my head against his cheek. It’s nice and cool, and leaning my head against it feels so good. “You think this thing, with us, it’ll last forever?” I must really be out of it if I’m asking these kinds of questions.

Brendan stops dead in his tracks. “Of course. Why do you ask?”

“I dunno. Just scared...”

“Scared of what?” Now there’s a mistrustful note in his voice.

“Of everything,” I reply evasively. “Of us, of the future... of what will happen...”

He takes a deep breath. “Lou... I love you. There’s nothing to be afraid of... I thought you knew that.”

“Okay,” I sigh shakily.

“Really okay?”

“Yeah.”

He starts walking again, and then points across the water. “Up there is the spot where we can cross to the other side. The lake turns back into a river again.”

“Bren?”

“Lou?”

“If we’re going to be together forever, we can live a normal life, can’t we?” I wrap my arms more tightly around his neck and nestle against his back, as if it will help prove that I’m serious. I don’t think I can actually picture what I’ve just suggested. What would it be like, living with him in Ash Springs? Or in a big city—New York, maybe? The thought has never occurred to me until now. Maybe someday we really could go back to my town and tell my brothers we eloped or something. The idea makes me dizzier than I already am. If we could make that happen...

In my feverish state, I only notice that he’s stopped walking because I start to miss the rhythmic rocking motion. His shoulders are as hard as granite; his whole body is tense, even his arms, which are securing my thighs like ropes.

“I can’t live a normal life, Louisa,” he declares in a firm voice.

It’s like getting thrown into ice-cold water. “But...”

"No buts. You know what happens to me during flashbacks, right?"

"But I'm not going to leave you." I'm still holding him tightly. "That means we can go somewhere together."

"No," he replies, sounding impatient. "It happens when I'm around a bunch of people. Did I tell you about the guy I beat unconscious during a flashback?"

"Yeah, once. Early on, after the thunderstorm."

"The only reason he didn't call the cops was because I paid him more money than he would have gotten from suing me. The regular world is full of triggers."

"You lived in the slums, weren't there triggers there?"

Brendan snorts in contempt. "Everything about them was one giant trigger, but that doesn't matter now. If I'd had flashbacks there, I doubt anyone would have noticed."

I'm not entirely sure where this conversation is going. I probably should have just shut my mouth, but now I can't help asking more questions, even though my head is pounding. "So the flashbacks didn't start immediately after... after whatever it was?"

"No."

Danger! Thin ice!

"When did they start?"

"When I was fighting for money. Years later. I thought I'd gotten past it all, like I could go on living without constantly thinking about it." He laughs bitterly. "Sometimes one word was enough. Or a bright light. Malls were terrible—too many stimuli. A certain perfume, the way someone walked or talked..."

"I can do the shopping," I murmur quietly, but I already know there's no point talking about it any further. Especially not now. Besides, I'm way too exhausted. My brain is being boiled to mush as we speak. "Bren?" I ask quietly.

"Lou?"

"Do you think maybe they'll get better someday?"

He sighs in resignation. "Maybe. Someday."

"Bren?"

"What now?" he asks in exasperation.

I press my face into his hair. “I love you too.”

I hear him swallow hard, and then he releases one of my legs so that he can pull my head close to his. “Oh, God, Lou...” he whispers hoarsely. “You’re always surprising me. I want to make you as happy as you deserve.”

“Bren?”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe we should talk less and hold each other more?”

“Maybe you should stop talking entirely and get better first,” he suggests and heaves me up again.

“Good idea.” I close my eyes and let the gentle rocking of his steps lull me. When I’m so close to his body like this, I feel safe. Close to his body like this, my doubts fall silent.

I drift through the next few days like a ghost. I can’t help Brendan at all anymore—I just sit there vegetating, bundled up like the Michelin Man, watching him set up camp. He makes leg compresses for me using cool river water, gives me plenty of tea and vitamins, but I get sicker and sicker, until Grey’s howling sounds like it’s coming through cotton and Brendan’s gentle murmuring is so distant that I don’t catch it at all. His words dance around inside me somewhere. I sleep a lot, even when I’m on Brendan’s back, to the point that he finally ties our torsos together with a rope, because I can’t hold on any longer and I keep tipping backward.

Once, I wake up and realize it’s already dark, but Brendan still hasn’t stopped to make camp. I’m shivering as violently as I did the night I fell into the water. I want to tell him I need a break, but for some reason I can’t form sentences anymore. An indistinct mishmash of noises comes out of my mouth, but Brendan seems to understand them.

“It’s okay, Lou. We’re almost there. I know it’s cold and you’re shivering, but I need to give you the antibiotics tonight. Your fever’s too high.”

“Antibiotics?” I don’t understand what he’s saying. Everything is liquid somehow, like I’m swimming.

“One more hour, two at the most. I know we need to get a fire going, but I can do it.”

My forehead sinks against his shoulder. “Maybe someday, maybe never, maybe in ten years,” I murmur, though I have no idea why.

CHAPTER 22

The first few days back at the camper are like being in a vacuum. I alternate between shivering and sweating; Brendan's constantly hovering nearby, but I barely notice how he's giving me medicine, changing my leg compresses or feeding me soup until I start feeling better. I allow myself to enjoy having him take care of me, and pretend I'm back home with him there.

On the fourth day after our return, he makes me spaghetti with sun-dried tomatoes and pine nuts; the following night, he fixes practically everything else I like, though I can't eat more than a few spoonfuls at a time. He carries me to the bench and messes with the TV until I can watch *Hero of the Week*.

One evening, as I'm sitting on the bench wrapped in my blanket, watching him wash dishes, I realize how tired he looks. The shadows beneath his cheekbones are as thick as beams, and the skin underneath his eyes is reddened. He was unusually silent at dinner, too. Not that we've been talking much lately, but he usually tries to make me laugh. Today, though, he just asked how my food was and told me Grey chewed a hole in his favorite sweatshirt. That was it.

"Are you okay?" I ask as he sets a plate by the sink to dry.

He turns all the way around and smiles at me, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Sure. Why do you ask?"

"You're so pale. I hope you're not coming down with the same thing I have."

Even though he's not finished with the dishes, he comes over and sits on the other side. "I don't think I *can* catch what you have," he replies, reaching across the table to lace his fingers with mine.

"Why not?" I don't like the look he's giving me at all. He looks like he's about to carry someone to their grave.

He doesn't reply, and for a moment we just sit there holding hands. I'd like to know what his emergency plan is. What if one of us gets seriously ill and he doesn't have any medication?

I study his face, trying to read it, but all I see is that tiredness. When he finally replies, it's in his voice, too. "I can't give you what you really need. There's no medicine for that. I think the only reason you're sick is because you're unhappy. It weakened your immune system... and then escaping into the cold..." He stands up and walks to the cupboard that he used to keep locked. He removes a brightly colored object. My heart leaps.

It's my pendant with the charms my brothers gave me. My umbilical cord to the world.

"I found it on the cliff." Brendan shifts from one foot to the other, suddenly uncertain. "Caught on a rock. I... I dunno, I wanted to wait to give it back until I'd fixed it for you." He holds it toward me, and I grab it with trembling fingers. "Seemed like it was important to you... you never took it off."

"Oh, Bren… thanks..." It comes out in a toneless whisper. I spread the chain out on the table in front of me, arranging it so that each of the charms is visible. I run my index finger over Ethan's silver cross, Avery's red heart, Liam's Buddha hand, and Jayden's turquoise disk.

Brendan sits across from me again. "Those are from your brothers." It's not a question.

I nod anyway, but can't manage to say anything in reply.

"Do you want to tell me about them?" He gives me an encouraging smile.

A single tear rolls down my face. He catches it with one finger, and then strokes my cheek. Now his expression is solemn, almost reverent. He probably thinks that if I talk about the people I miss, I'll

feel better afterward. Maybe because I once told him that it helps to say things out loud.

I take the chain and put it around my neck. It feels like part of my heart is complete again, a part that's been hurting so badly since the night I saw the canoes that I've had it buried deep inside myself.

The desire to talk about home is overwhelming, so I pick up the chain like it's a life preserver and force myself to just start speaking. In a halting voice, I talk about the sacrifices Ethan made for the family, his fear of losing me, the burden he bore for us all. I tell Bren about Avery's way of mediating between us and keeping the family in balance. I describe Liam, who never felt like he belonged because he was too young to be one of the adults in the house and too old to be one of the kids, which is probably why he went to India—he felt like there was no place for him at home. I'm surprised at how clear all of that suddenly seems from a distance. I tell him about how smart Jayden is, how passionate he is about understanding everything, and how reserved he is around other people. And then I tell him about the little girl in the white nightshirt who chased invisible rhinoceroses and never wanted to live anywhere but that wooden house in Ash Springs.

When I stop talking, I'm crying. Maybe I've been crying this whole time.

Brendan strokes my hands, which are still clutching the necklace. He looks even worse than he did earlier.

"You're acting so weird today," I say, hoarse from crying. "What's wrong?"

"I dunno." He takes my head in his hands and kisses my forehead tenderly before standing up and walking out.

I watch the door shut behind him. He seems lost in a strange way. But he has me, doesn't he? No, he has more. He has my love. Which was what he always wanted.

"Do you understand him?" I ask Grey, who's dozing beside me on the bench, but of course his only response is to lick my fingers happily.

Shaking my head, I get to my feet and finish the dishes. Whenever I have to stop and rest against the counter because my

legs are threatening to give out, my gaze shifts outside, to Brendan sitting by the fire smoking. He's staring into the flames, the way he used to do all the time. Once or twice, I see him toying with his armband.

I snuggle up in the warm blanket again, follow Brendan out into the night, and then simply take a seat on his lap. He wraps his arms around me, but his embrace feels different. More cautious, more withdrawn, almost like there's something in between us that I don't know about.

"Is the charm on your armband a memento, too?" I ask after we've been sitting in silence for a while.

"It belonged to my mother." He clears his throat elaborately.

"Do you want to talk about her?"

"No." There's an edge to his voice I haven't heard in a while.

"You said she abandoned you," I say anyway.

He jerks like I've just punched him in the gut.

"And yet you still have that coin, and you even had that symbol tattooed on your back."

Now he lets out a pained groan and covers his face with his hands. "Please, don't, Lou."

"Bren, look at me." I gently pull his hands away. When I look into his eyes, they're huge and wide and full of all the terrible things he must have gone through. "I want to help you. One day you're going to have to talk about it. You've got to."

He stiffens. "I don't *have* to do anything."

"Otherwise we'll never be able to have a normal life together. I'll always be scared of you. Part of me will always be afraid of the other Brendan, you know?"

He stares through me like I'm invisible. "I never told you about my mom. How do you know I think she abandoned me?"

I try to hold his gaze with my own, but he's trapped in the darkness. "You talk about the past during your flashbacks," I finally admit. "You play different roles."

His whole body freezes.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that?"

"No."

I slip my arms around his neck. “I guess I know more about you than you realize. You told me you couldn’t talk about those days, but when you’re stuck in your memories, that’s exactly what you do.” I hadn’t planned on telling him any of this, but maybe it’s better if he knows. “You have to talk about it. Maybe then the flashbacks will stop.”

“Is that why you did it?” His voice is suddenly so icy and dark that a chill runs down my spine.

“Did what?”

“Loved me. Was it out of pity?” He jumps up, half-shoving me off his lap, which is all it takes since I tumble over in fright anyway.

I stumble a few feet away and can’t help laughing because everything he’s saying is so ridiculous. “Where did you get the idea....”

He stares at me, narrowing his eyes to slits. “Was it out of pity? Yes or no?”

“N-no, no! Of course not...” I stammer, realizing he’s dead serious. My heart starts beating wildly—whether in fear, shock, or bewilderment, I’m not sure. I shake my head. “You think the only reason I didn’t yell for those canoers was because I pitied the guy who kidnapped me? Do you seriously think that would be enough for me to want to sacrifice my whole life? Pity?”

He walks to the fire, stands there with folded arms. Suddenly, he doesn’t look sick anymore at all. He’s wearing that mask of rage and bitterness again. “Maybe you would have shouted for them, how can I know for sure?” he asks in the voice of a stranger.

I’m frozen in pain and devastation. “Stop it,” I plead in a choked whisper.

“Maybe I got there right in time, and you took advantage of the situation. Slept with me to prove to me that you love me.”

I’m trying to figure out what’s going on here, but I just don’t understand. How can he say these things after what we shared? How can he take that magical night under the willow and twist it around so that it was just some cheap game I was playing? How can he accuse me of faking my feelings when I’m laying myself bare to him, making myself completely vulnerable? Doesn’t he know how

much it cost me to admit all of this to myself? Doesn't he know that it feels like my soul has suddenly become a piece of raw, exposed skin?

"I wasn't trying to prove anything to you!" I hiss. Rage starts bubbling to the surface through my shock. "I had nothing to prove to you because I *love* you! But if you keep talking like this, I'll probably end up regretting it."

"Oh, yeah, I regret a lot of things, too." He glowers down at me with a frightening expression on his face. "How could I have believed for even one second that you meant any of it? What were you hoping to get out of those theatrics? Were you going to appeal to my guilty conscience eventually? Tell me I can't go on keeping you prisoner since we're so close? That if I truly love you, I'll set you free?"

The light from the fire flickers across his features, making him look as terrifying as he does during his flashbacks.

"I... I can't believe you really think I would do that." I think I'm about to have a nervous breakdown. My brain can't keep up with all of this. "Do you seriously think I would go as far as to sleep with you... just so you would think I love you?"

He gives me a contemptuous scowl, shrugging his shoulders. "Maybe you genuinely thought you could heal me if you pretended to be into me. But it was never about me, it was about your freedom."

I'm freezing cold, shivering violently. This whole conversation is so wrong. "You... you must really, really hate me to say those things about me." I reach for my necklace and clutch it so hard that the charms bore into the palm of my hand. "I don't get you. All I said was that I know more about you than you realize. You had an attack during that thunderstorm. Even back then, you told me more than I think you would have otherwise. And I still hated you afterward anyway. Those two things have nothing to do with each other."

I look at him, at the way he's standing there, cold and hostile. I don't know where the Brendan who believed in me and my love has gone. He can't have just disappeared. I screw up my courage, walk over to him, and force myself to smile as I grip his shoulder, like

maybe it'll pull him out of this confused rage. "Bren, please, surely you don't seriously believe that."

He shudders at my touch like he's afraid I'm trying to poison him. "Quit it, Louisa." He jerks to the side.

I'm so desperate to get through to him, I want to pound my fists against his chest. Not screaming is taking an absolutely inhuman amount of self-control. I take a couple of long, deep breaths. "Brendan. Listen to me. This is crazy! I didn't fall in love with you because your dad buried you in the ground somewhere," I say, shaking my head. Only when I hear him inhale sharply do I realize what I just said.

He's pale now. His eyes are dark graves. "Stop that! Now!"

"Bren, I love you! And of course I'm unbelievably sorry about what happened to you. And yeah, I *do* wish I were the one who could heal you, but unfortunately, love alone isn't going to do it." I reach for him again, but he retreats again like I'm a monster. "The things that happened to you, all the love in the world wouldn't heal them. When you left that cupboard open, I saw one of the pictures you drew. I told you that once already, but you were in a flashback, so you probably don't remember. Let's go to a psychologist and start fresh..."

"Sure, bring me to a psychologist so that you have a chance to escape!" he shrieks, completely out of his head. "You don't want me! You just want to leave!"

"*That's not true*!" I scream right back at him. "I gave up everything for you! My whole *life*. But apparently that isn't worth anything to you. You know what? I wish I *had* called for help at the river! I wish I'd at least *wanted* to call for help! I wish I was at home, instead of with you!"

He hunches his back as though bracing himself against a whipping. Then he stands there motionless for seconds on end, staring at me. When he speaks again, his voice is completely emotionless. "I'm so glad I saw through you in time."

The words are a maelstrom whirling through my head. A wave of dizziness washes over me. "What do you mean, *in time*?"

The corners of his mouth twist downward in scorn. I've never seen him this way. "I'm such an idiot! I wanted to let you go." He says it softly, but so cuttingly that each word is a needle in my heart. "No kidding, I've been considering it since we got back here. Wait, before that—since you told me you loved me." He grips his forehead and lets out a short laugh, then shakes his head in disbelief. "But it was all a lie."

He was thinking about letting me go! I can't believe it. Surely he's not serious. He's just saying that to hurt me. My head is one giant mass of chaos. But then I suddenly remember the weird way he was behaving earlier. He was acting so lonely, like he'd already lost me. The realization makes a violent sob bubble up in my throat. "You were going to let me leave?" I whisper. "You thought about it?" I take a step toward him, but he moves away again.

"Doesn't matter," he says decisively. He's as unapproachable as he was in the beginning. "I changed my mind."

I press my fist to my mouth to suppress my crying, but it won't stop, it just won't stop. I don't want to cry, though, because he'll think I'm crying over having lost my chance to leave... and I'm not, I'm crying because of him. Because he doesn't see how much I love him. He's so sick that he's denying the truth. He thinks he doesn't deserve love. And it's only now that I understand how real and true and genuine his love is. I know what letting me go would cost him. Knowing that he even considered it hurts so much that I want to die.

I stretch out a hand in his direction. "Bren... please... you can't think that about me..."

"You should go inside," he says coldly. "You're not quite healthy yet." Abruptly, like a marionette taking orders from the spirit world, he sets into motion and grabs the arm I'm still reaching for him with. "Come on."

He pushes me along in front of him. *Travel America* blurs into a red-and-blue ocean before he jerks me up the steps. "Brendan, please, snap out of this..." In the hallway, I stumble over the blanket, but he catches me and shoves me onto the bed.

He walks away stiffly to retrieve a chain and a handcuff. "Give me your wrist."

I hold out my arm. I can't see anything anymore through the tears. I hear the lock click into place, and then I hear him stomp away and slam the door to the outside. Every inch of me hurts. It's like I've lost everything—Brendan, my brothers, my freedom, all of it. I roll onto my side and draw my knees in. My whole body is wracked with sobs. I don't want to feel anything anymore. If there were knockout drops sitting around in here, I would drink the whole bottle.

An ear-splitting shriek shatters the night, chilling me to the bone. I'm totally confused for a few seconds before I realize that I must have nodded off from grief and exhaustion. At first I'm not sure whether the scream was real or part of my dream. But I wasn't dreaming, was I?

I jerk into a sitting position and peer out the window. The fire is still going, but Brendan's disappeared from view. I press my nose to the pane, trying to get a closer look, but then another scream pierces the air. It sounds dark and evil, like a wild animal discovering that it's chained up. Grey starts growling. I scoot to the center of the bed and peer into the hallway. Grey's standing at the side door with his ears back, snarling. Shudders of terror run down my spine. I'm not sure if those are human or animal noises.

"Here, Grey!" I whisper, patting the blanket with my hand. My gaze shifts to my wrist.

The chain is gone!

Brendan must have taken it off while I was asleep! Even as frightened as I am, the realization gives me a tiny glimmer of hope, but I'm way too anxious to figure out what this means. I tiptoe forward, leaving the light off, and peek through the window above the sink. Nothing's changed. The campfire casts a bright glow across the grassy area in front of the spruces. I scoot across the bench to peer out the window on the opposite side. Darkness and trees. Nothing else.

Grey's still growling at the door.

"Shh, calm down," I murmur as reassuringly as I can, and then scoot back toward the hallway. Is the door locked? Another wave of goose bumps runs over my arms. If Brendan's out there having a flashback, it'd probably be better if I made sure he didn't come in, regardless of what he thinks about me now. Cautiously, I slip toward the door and fumble with the lock until it clicks shut. I breathe a sigh of relief—but then another realization hits me.

What if the thing out there isn't Brendan? What if it's actually an animal? A grizzly bear or a bull elk? Those don't generally care much about locked doors. What if Brendan needs help?

I stand there for a moment, trembling. Grey's fallen silent now, and I listen hard for more noises, but there's nothing out there.

Silently, I sneak to the driver's cab, one step at a time. The front window is the only one I haven't checked. I kneel between the armrests and peer out. The sky is raven black, which is why it's so dark out that I can barely see a thing. I let my eyes drift down to the treetops, and then to their slim trunks.

Nothing.

I go back to the door. I'm not sure what to do. I cast an uncertain glance at Grey, who jumps up on my legs excitedly. He's grown a lot, but he's still no bigger than a poodle. Next to a full-grown bear, he'd probably look like a stuffed animal, and his growling and yowling wouldn't be enough to scare anything bigger than a squirrel.

The next scream seems to rock the whole camper. It feels like the floor is shaking underneath my feet. The evil in it has given way to a mixture of horror and hopelessness. Grey starts whining, and I break out in a sweat. All at once, I know that it's Brendan. He needs help. He's never screamed like this. I'm sure he's trapped in his past, reliving those horrible moments again. I remember how I felt in that box. Alone in the dark, not sure if I'm dead or alive.

I have to get to him! Flashback or no flashback! I have to tell him that I love him and that he can't give up hope. He needs to know that I'm not leaving him, no matter what! He told me I was his light, his sun.

I unlock the door and walk down the steps. Icy night air swirls around me, but I'm only half aware of it. Without the screams, the night suddenly seems deathly still, even if it isn't. The fire is crackling nearby; an owl hoots somewhere in the distance. As I walk along the edge of the woods, the dry needles snap and crack beneath the soles of my shoes.

"Bren?" As confident as I was about this idea a minute ago, I'm absolutely terrified now. Darkness lies in the forest like death. I keep peeking between the trees—Bren can't have gone far. I circle the entire area, staying close to the dark conifers. Eventually, I get back to the fire. "Bren? Where are you?"

Suddenly, I hear a clinking sound. Something huge and dark is racing toward me. It throws itself at me, and I tumble to the ground. Pain shoots through my hands, through my ankle. Dust and dirt whirl around me.

"You filthy bastard son of a godless whore! I'll kill you!"

I roll onto my back. It takes me several seconds to take stock of the situation. Brendan's standing over me, secured to a tree by a long iron chain, the way he was the night of the thunderstorm. The handcuffs at the end are around his wrists.

"Bren." I'm afraid to scoot away, afraid of how he'll react. "Bren, it's me, Lou." My heart is beating in my throat. His eyes are bloodshot, full of a chilling madness.

"I'll kill you," he hisses through his teeth.

"No," I whisper shakily. "You won't. You love me."

"You left me. You went away... it was so dark... do you know what it was like down there, in the ground..."

"Yeah. I do." I need every ounce of my self-control to keep myself from bursting into frightened, empathetic tears. "Everything was quiet. You were alone. In every space between two heartbeats, you thought you'd died. And when you thought you were dead, you were still alone. Even when you were out again. You longed for your mother's arms, but she never came back."

"How could you leave me?" All at once, his face is as haggard as Ethan's was in that newspaper article.

It suddenly occurs to me that my brothers may believe the same thing about me that Brendan does about his mother. "M-maybe... maybe she didn't leave you," I stammer. "Something might have happened to her. Maybe someone kidnapped her. Or maybe the person who did those things to you also made sure that she couldn't find you. Or that she couldn't come back."

Brendan stares at me with wide eyes. His fists unclench in slow motion. He shakes his head, dazed. "Lou?" he whispers weakly. "What are you doing here?"

"Bren, thank God..." When I look at him, I almost burst into tears after all, this time in relief. Only now do I see the blood welling up beneath his iron shackles, running down his hands. "You're hurt," I exclaim in shock.

"Better me than you," he growls and jerks on the chain, which releases another rivulet of blood. "You need to get back inside, now."

"No." I clamber to my feet. For a moment, my vision blurs into a swirling mass of shadows and light. I wait for the dizzy spell to pass before stepping toward him. "Let me stay with you."

He hunches over and then starts screaming again a moment later, seemingly giving voice to all the tortures of his childhood at once. He's shivering uncontrollably, staggering back and forth.

I can't stand seeing him this way. It tears me apart, because I don't know how to help him. All I can do is stand there, paralyzed.

When it passes, he doesn't seem to know where he is anymore. I step closer again, but he stumbles away from me. Then I notice just how many chains he's linked together. He disappears into the strip of forest between the campfire and the lake, hiding from me in the darkness. I follow him and discover him between two trees. He's standing perfectly still, breathing in ragged gasps. I don't know what he's going to do next. Knock me to the ground? Beat me up? Try to kill me, maybe? I know it'd be better if I stayed out of reach, but I can't leave him out here by himself in the darkness.

"Brendan..." I push aside a branch that's in my way. We're barely an arm's length apart now. *Go on, Lou, get closer!*

I know that I'm going to have to take one more leap in order to get through to him. Just jump this one final chasm, and then

everything will be okay. It has to be! I look at him. He's frozen, trapped inside his own head, but I'm not going to abandon him. *Closer. Get closer.* I feel the cold loneliness enveloping him. My knees are shaking. *Keep breathing. Let your bodies take over. Closer. There you go.*

With a gasp of fear, I encircle his waist with my arms and put my head on his chest. I'm expecting him to push me away, but it's as though he's been turned to stone. I close my eyes for a moment to put myself in total darkness. He's not seeing anything, either, though his eyes are open. I cling to him, trying to imagine what he's been through. Reality seems to blur, like we're becoming one spirit. Even though we're in the forest, we're locked in. Locked into our reality, locked into this moment. The walls inside him are so massive, they seem to surround us both. But they might be glass walls rather than stone, judging from how he described it once.

"I'm not leaving you by yourself, Bren," I murmur after a long time.

"You're crazy." I can sense that he wants to push me away, but for once he doesn't have the strength.

"I don't care if you kick me or hit me or whatever when you're out of your head. I'm not going anywhere. Push me away, I'll still be here." I hug him as tightly as I can.

He's trembling in my arms. "I can't let you do that."

"You don't have a choice. You said I was pretending, but you're wrong. I love you."

He lets out a cry of despair and buries his face in his hands. His chains clink as he lowers his hands again to look into my eyes. "I know, Lou," he whispers. "I know."

Tears of relief spring to my eyes. I can't get a single word out. He strokes my cheeks, making them wet with his blood and my tears.

"I really was thinking about letting you go," he says quietly. "I guess deep down I was trying to find a reason not to have to do it. So I wanted to believe you were faking it. I wanted to be mad at you."

More and more tears roll down my cheeks. I'm so unbelievably glad he doesn't believe that crap anymore.

"Hey, don't cry. Shh. Everything's okay. I'm sorry about what I said." He withdraws from my embrace, but then his face abruptly turns anxious. "You need to go! Hurry!"

"No, I'm staying! And the next time you think you're in that place you're so scared of, just imagine I'm there too."

"Lou..."

I fling my arms around him again. "Do it, please! Just try."

His muscles tense up. "What if it doesn't work? What if I attack you?"

I press my hands against his back tightly. "I'll stay anyway."

I feel his rib cage tighten, like he's trying to suppress the horrors inside him.

"Let it out," I whisper. "Scream, shout, go ahead, nobody will hear you. Except me. And I can take it. I'll be right here."

His arms close around me. His fingernails dig into my shoulder blades. Within seconds, rivers of sweat soak his entire shirt. And then he starts screaming. Dark, anguished sounds of pain and horror fill the entire forest. Something dashes away through the underbrush. A knot of fear forms in my chest. Bren's trembling so hard he loses his footing. He takes me with him. I don't know what I was expecting, but this is worse than anything I could have ever imagine. His screaming seems to envelop me in his terror. I can feel it on my skin, like frost. See it in my head as twisted images, the product of my own imagination: a dark grave, a coffin, hands pushing on the lid from the inside, but it's too heavy. It's so heavy, and everything's so terribly dark. *So dark. So deep in the ground. I can't breathe, I can't breathe. Mom? Where are you? Come back! Mom, come get me out! Mom, please, it's so dark!*

I try to catch my breath, and then realize that I can't breathe. Brendan's squeezing me so tightly that my ribs are pressing against my lungs, so my rib cage can't expand at all. Desperately, I brace my arms against his, trying to push him away, but he doesn't let go. I throw my head back. A high, whistling noise comes out of my

mouth. Black stars flash in front of my eyes. *Bren*, I want to scream...

A moment later, he shoves me back, and I stumble off to the side. "Bren." I gulp air desperately, trying to meet his gaze.

He's standing right in front of me, staring down with a hate-filled expression. He takes one long step toward me. "I should kill you," he whispers in a terrifyingly soft voice. Before I can react, his hand is at my throat, and then he slams me against the nearest tree.

"Bren," I croak. "Don't." I try to wedge my fingers underneath his, but I can't.

He squeezes, crushing my throat. Fear courses through my veins. His eyes are pure ice. "You're nothing, you little bastard. Nothing. Dust and ashes. I could kill you and nobody would ever know. Nobody would ever miss you."

A whimper escapes my lips.

"I'm going to stick you in a coffin and bury you in the yard. But this time, I'm not going to dig you up again. You can shit your pants in there as much as you want, and die in your own filth, how does that sound?" He leans in toward me, fixing me with midnight-black eyes filled with contempt. "Answer me!"

"Bren... stop... you're... not... him..." The pressure on my throat cracks the words into choppy noises garbled with fear.

"Your pitiful whining isn't going to save your weak, sorry ass." His breath hits my face like fists. His fingers tighten around my throat even more.

Everything is spinning. I have to get through to him, but I don't know how. I can't think. "Bren..." I pull on his fingers, taste salt on my lips. "I love you... come back..."

He stiffens. His eyes seem like they're made of glass.

"Don't... leave me! Come... back!" The raw pain in my throat is getting worse with every word. "Please... come back..." Snot runs from my nose, mingling with my tears. "Brendan... please..."

His grip loosens, and his expression turns to one of confusion. "I'm here, Lou," he whispers, bewildered. Then he freezes, staring at his hand, which is still clutching my neck. Confusion gives way to

shock, and then absolute agony. Slowly, he releases his fingers one by one, like he's afraid he might make a wrong move somehow.

My legs buckle immediately, and I collapse to my knees. I draw in a sharp breath, and a moment later, I feel him pulling me up again carefully. "Lou, say something, please..."

I cling to his upper arms and inhale cautiously as tears stream down my face. My throat still hurts like hell, but right now I don't care, because it's over. For now, it's finally over!

"Forgive me... Lou..." He mumbles something else that I don't catch, and wipes my tears away.

I blink until my vision clears, and then look up at him: his weary eyes, his hollow cheeks, the sweat beading on his forehead. I don't regret anything. "Wasn't so bad," I whisper, trying not to let on how much pain I'm still in, or how terrified I was. My own fear is nothing compared to what he experienced.

He shakes his head vehemently. "You're lying. You're shaking like crazy."

"I'm just cold."

"Lou. My hand was around your throat, and you're telling me it wasn't that bad?" He lifts my chin to inspect my neck. "Fuck," he hisses. "When I flip out, you can't be there. That's insane. You have to believe me."

"I believe you, but I'm doing it anyway." Somehow I manage to force out a smile. "Anyway, you're back, that's all that matters."

He rests his forehead against mine. "I'm not letting you put yourself in danger again."

"You have to." I punch him in the chest playfully. Even that one slight motion is enough to wear me out. "You're the one who chained yourself to a tree like a dog, not me."

He responds with an artificial laugh, but then turns serious again immediately. "Then at least let me carry you back to the fire." Without waiting for my reply, he scoops me into his arms. He's shaking more violently than I am, but he pretends nothing's wrong—except once, when he nearly trips over his own long iron chain, and curses.

When we reach the fire, he sets me on the ground, and then scoots in behind me, wrapping his arms and legs around me to form a warm, protective cage. I lean my head back against his chest and hold his forearms.

"Don't let me go ever again, Lou," he whispers. "Not ever."

"I won't," I whisper back and close my eyes.

After a few minutes, he strokes my hair. "Next time I have an attack, you keep your distance, okay?"

"Bren...."

"Promise me!" He says it so urgently, so desperately, that I nod reluctantly. I know he'd never forgive himself if he injured me, and I definitely don't want him feeling guilty. He's suffered enough already. And if I'm being honest with myself, I know he's right.

"I'm only going a few feet away, though," I say in a decisive tone. "And if you need me, I'll be there."

He doesn't respond. I turn halfway toward him, and almost immediately, his lips are on mine, soft and rough, hesitant and insistent. I taste blood and tears. Sadness and joy. He runs his hands down my head and then wraps his arms around my shoulders, pulling me closer. I'm falling into a bottomless pit, down, down. I never want it to stop. I never want to hit the ground. I want to keep falling, keep losing myself with him.

The sky is already full of dove-grey clouds when I finally retrieve the key to Brendan's restraints, which he left on the side-view mirror. Arm-in-arm, we return to the camper.

Grey puts on a welcoming ceremony like we've been gone for a week. This time, though, I can't give him the attention he wants—I just fall straight into bed. We've fought too many battles tonight.

I'm dimly aware that Brendan starts heating some milk for Grey, but then I'm out, fast asleep like a newborn baby.

CHAPTER 23

I awaken to the hum of the generator and the sound of the coffee maker burbling on the counter. I blink, bleary-eyed, and sit up.

"Hey, sleepyhead." Brendan smiles at me. He's standing in the hall, toasting our last few frozen pancakes as though nothing unusual happened last night.

"Hey yourself." It hurts a little to talk, but other than that, everything seems okay. Well, my body feels like one big crisis zone, but for the first time, I'm not worried about it. Not after last night.

"What time is it?"

"Afternoon."

I slide out of bed and walk over to Brendan slowly. He's still wearing the same clothes as last night, but his hair's neatly combed and tied back in a short ponytail. I catch a glimpse of a gauze bandage underneath one sleeve of his hoodie, and there's a Band-Aid on his forehead.

He wraps his arms around me gently, and I lay my head on his chest. We spend a few minutes just standing there, silent except for the humming generator and the dripping coffee machine. Everything around us is the same, but things between us feel new—deeper, heavier, more solid. Not fragile like glass anymore. I know I'm not going to have to weigh each word to make sure it won't destroy our relationship. I nestle against him, as secure as a moth that's found a safe spot to hide. I never want to come out.

When the coffee maker stops running, we let go of one another. Brendan lifts my head with his fingers and peers at my neck. He doesn't say anything, but his eyes speak volumes. I slip into the bathroom and immediately notice five long, red marks on my skin. Instinctively, I run my fingertips over them. They're not too bad—they'll probably be gone in two or three days at the most. Brendan's words, on the other hand, I'll never forget. The things he went through are still echoing inside me like a dull pain. I was wrong. He's not weak, he's strong. Otherwise he couldn't possibly have survived all of that.

I splash some water on my face and comb my hair, and then go into the back room to put on fresh clothes: clean underwear, long jeans, my white blouse, and the pale-yellow scarf with the tiny multicolored hearts to hide Brendan's finger marks.

When I return to the front, Bren gestures to the set table with a smile. "Sit!" He switches the generator off. To my relief, he doesn't say anything about the scarf.

I slide onto the bench. "Why are the curtains drawn?" I ask. This is new. Even the ones dividing the main room from the driver's cab are shut.

"I wanted you to be able to sleep as long as possible. I mean, by the time we went to bed, the sun was already up." He smiles again, but this time he averts his gaze. "Plus I thought this would be more romantic."

"So you want to spend the rest of the day in here with me, hm?" I tease him, not taking my eyes off him. Why won't he look at me?

But then he does, with a wink. "I can think of a couple things I wouldn't mind doing with you..."

I wink back, but the weird feeling stays with me. Head propped on my hands, I regard the blue dishes with the little vanilla-colored roses. Something's different, even though everything's the same. Everything except the drawn curtains.

I glance around again, and then I realize what's bothering me. "Where's Grey?"

Brendan pours two cups of coffee and sets them on the table before stacking the pancakes on a plate. "He's in the passenger seat.

Probably better if we let him rest, he was puking all morning."

"He threw up? Is he sick?"

Bren sits down beside me, and having him close calms me down. I'm not sure why exactly I need calming down. It's just this weird feeling. "Don't worry about it. Probably ate something bad in the woods. I'll have to start giving him meat soon, or who knows what half-rotten dead things he'll start finding to chew on."

I smile. "You want to do that regurgitating thing, knock yourself out. I'm still gonna pass." I lean against him affectionately and sip my coffee. For some reason I'm not hungry. After a while, I realize Brendan's not touching his food, either. The funny feeling in my stomach flares up again. "You didn't sleep at all, did you?" I glance at Brendan from the side. His face is positively ashen, and the whites of his eyes are shot through with fine red lines. "If you spent the whole morning mopping up wolf puke, you can't have slept."

"Yeah, you're right." He nods at the pancakes, the maple syrup, and the lemon cookies. "Eat something, Lou, please. You need your strength."

There's a note in his voice I can't quite place. It's not just his usual worry. There's something decisive in it, too. And pained. But maybe he's simply wrecked after the long night and the work-intensive morning.

I try to smile away the weird feeling in my stomach. "Well, you eat too, then."

"Okay."

The longer we spend chewing in silence, the more I get the sense that Brendan's keeping something from me. Once I've choked down half a pancake, I set the rest back on the plate. "What's wrong, Bren?"

He lowers his hand in slow motion, staring at the pancake as though it's the most interesting thing he's ever seen. I pluck it out of his fingers and slap it onto my own plate. "Tell me!"

"Okay." He reaches across the table to take my hands in his, squeezing them so hard that a sense of foreboding rises in my sore throat. "That day on the river, when you didn't call to those guys for help... you made a decision that was right for you in that moment. It

may have actually been wrong, but it felt right at the time, I don't know."

"It's still right."

He smiles, but he looks so lost that I nearly burst into tears right then and there. "Maybe today it is. Maybe it is for you. But what about for your family? What about your brothers?"

I swallow hard. Deep down, I know he's got a point, but I don't want to hear it. Not after yesterday.

He grips my fingers even more tightly. "What if our relationship falls apart five years from now? Then I'll have stolen part of your life, kept you from going to college or starting a career. You'll hate me."

"I could never hate you," I choke out. I'm not sure what he's getting at, but whatever it is, it feels horribly wrong.

He takes our interlaced fingers and presses them to his own cheek. "I believe that you love me, Lou. Don't get me wrong. But what if you only love me because you were so lonely? What if it's just the kind of love that victims have for their kidnappers?"

I withdraw my hands from his. "What do you want to hear, Bren? How am I supposed to answer? I can't be sure about any of that. All I know is that I love you. I liked you the minute we met at the visitors' center. I could just as easily have fallen for you without… this."

He gives me a penetrating look. "I'm not sure if you're capable of making good choices right now, Lou. Which is why I decided to choose for you."

"Choose what? What do you want?" My voice breaks.

He presses his lips into a thin, white line, but the shimmering tears in his eyes are what scare me the most. "Maybe is yes, and someday is today." His lower lip trembles, and he bites down on it so hard that it starts bleeding.

It takes me a minute to figure out what he means. "You... want to... let me go? Today?" All at once, my throat is so tight that I can't breathe—even worse than yesterday. It's like I'm underwater, watching Brendan's words swim past me from beneath the surface of a lake. I can see his lips moving, but I can't understand what he's

saying. None of this is really happening. I'm imagining the whole thing.

"Lou? Lou... are you hearing what I'm saying?"

I shake my head briefly and look up at Brendan, at his red eyes and his firmly set lips. I know he thinks he's doing what has to be done. But I also know it's wrong. "You can't just send me away," I blurt out. "I'm not going."

He stands up. My first instinct is to threaten to tell on him if he sends me away, but we both know I would never do that.

Without saying a thing, he draws back the divider curtain in front of the driver's cab. For a second, I think maybe I've lost my mind. I stare outside, paralyzed. No spruces, no pines, no birches. No forest at all. Just a huge, grey parking lot with a couple of beat-up, forgotten-looking station wagons. A blackbird hops across the asphalt and picks up something I don't see. Suddenly, I feel totally and completely lost.

"Bren..." I whisper. "How... I mean... what..." I can't form a coherent thought. Dazed, I get up and go to the window over the sink, and then open the curtain... revealing more cold, grey parking lot beneath a cold, grey sky. In the distance, I see a long, flat concrete building, and what look like human figures in front of it. It strikes me as unreal, not part of this world. Not part of mine, anyway.

"I spent the whole day driving. You... you were dead asleep, you had no idea. I wanted to surprise you."

My vision blurs. "Grey didn't eat anything bad," I say absently.

"He got carsick."

I turn to look at him. I want to scream at him, but then I see that he's covering his eyes with his hands. "Wh-why... Bren? I don't understand..."

He comes over and embraces me, holding me tight. He's shaking, and his heart is racing. "You don't know?"

"Yeah, I do." A tear runs down my cheek. "But why today already? Why now, after everything that happened yesterday?" Just the thought of leaving him makes me freak out, the same way that I

freaked out in the beginning at the thought of being trapped with him forever.

"The question is, if not today, when?" He takes my face in his hands, caressing it with his eyes. His pupils are as big as they were that first day. "I'm afraid I'll change my mind if I don't let you go right away. Like, right now, you know?"

"*Now*?"

He runs a thumb across my cheek. "There's no other way."

"No..." Each word he says is another cruel blow to my unprotected soul. I can't just leave now, so totally unprepared, so totally alone.

He rests his forehead on mine. Oh, God, when he lets go of me, I'm going to shatter into a thousand tiny pieces, and nobody and nothing in the world will ever be able to put me back together. Including me. But I know that moment's coming. It's inevitable. Maybe this is how things have to end. Maybe it was meant to be like this.

"Lou." He's never spoken my name more tenderly. "Trust me. It's better this way. One day, you'll know that this was the right decision. Maybe not for today, but for all of the other days that come after it."

"What about you?" I ask in a strangled voice. "What happens when you have another flashback?"

"After tonight... I'll just imagine you're with me." He carefully releases me, and I really do shatter, even though I'm just standing there stiffly. A crack opens up inside me, and then a thousand more spider out from the first. It's like my soul is bursting. "You've done so much for me already, Lou. So much." His voice echoes along the cracks. I feel empty, hollowed out. "All I can do for you is let you go. And that's what I have to do. Because I love you."

He walks to the door and opens it wide. The air outside smells unfamiliar: concrete, trash, and people instead of spruce needles and wood. I still can't move. "You need to go before I change my mind." His voice sounds so lonely. So empty. And suddenly I understand how hard this must be for him, how much this is costing him. It's a hundred times harder for him than for me. I need to pull myself together for his sake, regardless of how I feel.

"I'll tell everyone I ran away," I say mechanically.

"Your brothers will hate you for that."

"Ethan, maybe."

"You can tell them the truth. The police will never find me."

It's not just fear of the police finding him, though. It's also the thought of what they would turn our story into. I couldn't possibly make Bren out to be a monster—I would always add that I fell in love with him. I picture myself in the police station. I can see the looks on the officers' faces now. *So you're saying he never raped you that whole time? Come on. You had sex with him willingly? Surely he must have threatened you. Consenting isn't the same as not fighting back, you know that, right?*

No. Listening to those questions would kill me. It would be like they were trying to destroy what Brendan and I had. I don't want reporters to turn this into a bunch of lurid stories. I don't want them pestering me to reveal everything I know about him. What Bren and I had together will stay our secret forever. It's too precious. And if that means Ethan hates me for supposedly running away, I'll just have to deal with it.

I gaze at Brendan, terrified of leaving him. I'm more afraid of this than I've ever been afraid of anything. But I have to be stronger than him now. I swallow my tears and my fear. I need to act strong for a few more minutes, that's all. Until I'm out of sight. "Where are we exactly?" I ask, trying to sound objective.

"We're in British Columbia." He reaches into the overhead cupboard and pulls down a backpack. "Money, food, fresh clothes, newspaper articles."

It hurts to see how well-prepared he is again.

He points through the door. "There's a mall and a bus stop about a quarter-mile that way. They have Greyhound lines to all the bigger cities, and you can transfer from there. I packed you a list of stations and departure times, I Googled them for you on the ol' Samsung."

"You have a cell phone?"

"I don't get any reception up there, Lou. Anyway, it's better if you don't hear anything from me for now."

"Right." Not crying is the hardest goddamn thing I've ever done.

He smiles. His eyes are full of tears. “You’ll understand soon.”

“Promise me something?” I gaze across the grey parking lot and can’t possibly imagine what I’m going to do out there.

“Depends.”

“Will you come back to Sequoia next year on June 25th? To the visitors’ center?”

He gives me a blank look.

“That was the day you first kidnapped me.”

He lets out a strange, short laugh. “I know that.”

“If we still love each other then, we can spend the summer together,” I say hurriedly. I need something to hold onto.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Lou. It would be better for you to just forget me. And it would definitely be better for me to forget you.”

“Think about it,” I whisper. With that, I take the backpack from him and walk down the stairs. For one crazy moment, I wish he would grab my arm and haul me back inside, slam the door, and chain me up. I wait for a moment, but nothing happens. “Bye, Bren,” I murmur without turning around. I don’t want to hug him again, I don’t want to kiss him again, I don’t want to see Grey again. It would break my heart, and I can’t let myself cry. I have to be strong for Brendan one last time, so I simply put one foot in front of the other. Right, left, right, left, again and again, the way I did the night I tried to run from him.

I can feel him watching me, sense him crying. In my mind, I hug him tightly. I keep my shoulders straight and my head held high, but inside I’m dying.

I’m vaguely aware that there are suddenly other people everywhere: chattering voices, rumbling car engines. The smell of exhaust, corn dogs, and French fries. It’s like I’ve landed on a different planet. I look around, but I can’t see anything. It’s too much for me to take in any details. Too many people, too many voices, too much noise. A wave of fear wells up inside me, and I’m not sure why. A moment later, I bump into someone else.

“S’cuse me,” I stammer quickly. I vaguely make out the shape of a woman.

She takes my upper arm gently. “Honey, are you okay? Do you need help?” The warmth in her voice sends everything crashing down. I feel my lips starting to tremble. But before I let myself fall apart completely, I have to know one thing.

“What day is today?”

“September 6th, honey. You’re so pale, you don’t look too good.”

I stare through her, tugging unconsciously at a strand of hair. September 6th. I was only with Brendan for two and a half months. It feels like it was a lot longer. Almost as an afterthought, I realize I’m seventeen now.

“Do you want to sit down?”

“I want to go home,” I manage to get out, and then I burst into tears.

CHAPTER 24

Something inside me is broken, but physically I'm still functioning. Still eating, still drinking, still breathing. Thanks to Brendan's list, I even manage to take the right buses. I spend the entire ride staring out the window, but his face is always looking back at me from out of the dark forests, above the snow-covered mountains, behind the green lakes. Is this the same route we took? How did he feel? How hard was it for him to lock me in the box after he'd experienced that same horror? Is that why he kept me drugged for so long?

I trace the raindrops running down the glass with one finger. There are so many things I still want to ask him, so many things I haven't told him yet. I might never get a chance to. I don't even know his last name or how old he is.

I'm so lost in thought that I go right on gazing out the window long after it gets dark. I catch a glimpse of my reflection. Weeks ago, I thought maybe I looked different than I used to, but now I realize that I look the same as ever, except with shorter hair and slightly thinner cheeks. The only problem is that I don't feel like myself at all. It's like someone else has taken over. What if my brothers notice? For one frightened moment, I wonder whether they'll believe the pack of lies I'm about to tell them.

I've decided to say that I ran off with two other girls I met at the park. I'm going to say we went to Canada, so that I won't have to

invent too many details. One of the girls, Mia, will have to be some wealthy stockbroker's daughter, because otherwise I won't be able to explain how we survived without doing anything criminal. Yeah, obviously she withdrew a ton of money before we met. I'm going to say that we wrote letters to our families so they wouldn't worry, but I guess mine must have gotten lost in the mail, which is why no other girls were reported missing. And then I'll say I don't want to talk about it, and hopefully they'll quit asking questions after a week or two.

I'm dreading those first couple of weeks. They're going to be like a mile-long bed of nails that I have to walk across barefoot and alone. Nobody will know my pain. Nobody will comfort me. Ethan will hate me; my brothers and friends won't understand what I'm going through. But I have to do it for Brendan, for the secret I have to bury deep inside myself, in the hopes that our time together isn't over yet. And if it is, then I just pray I won't ever forget it, that I won't wake up one day and realize that all of these thoughts and feelings and dreams have faded to nothing more than the smeared colors of the sky, the river, the spruces, and bodies entangled in the sand—like the kiss of a moth settling upon us, only to fly onward after one fleeting encounter.

I close my teary eyes and reach for my necklace, clutching the charms because they give me something to hold onto. Ethan's cross, Avery's heart, Liam's hand, Jayden's disk, another disk... there's another round charm on my necklace. I stop short. The tears spill over. I don't even have to look to know what's in my hand: a silver coin engraved with a bird with two different wings. Brendan must have slipped it onto my necklace sometime this morning. I bring it to my lips with trembling fingers and brush a kiss onto it, the goodbye kiss I never gave Brendan.

When I get off the bus in Ash Springs four days later, it's late in the evening. I feel completely drained. Cried out.

The first thing I'm aware of is the herby smell of sagebrush, and then the heat radiating from the dry, dusty ground. It's a strange

feeling, neither familiar nor unfamiliar. I walk along the perfectly straight road, hoping nobody sees me. Once in a while, I raise my eyes to marvel at details I'm noticing for the first time: the rust-red roof of the little convenience store, the tall mailbox on the corner, in front of the house with the peeling window sills.

I turn onto the Road to Nowhere, and suddenly every cell in my body is tingling. Underneath my infinite longing for Brendan, under all the confusion and the mental exhaustion and everything, I feel something close to joy. This is home, this is where the people I love live. The people I've been missing so desperately.

Without consciously trying to, I start walking faster. I didn't call in advance, because I had no idea what to say to my brothers on the phone. Soon I'm running down the path... and then I see our house. My heart is beating heavily in my chest. The space underneath the apple tree is empty; the door is closed. I slow down, come to a stop, sweep my gaze across the yard. Everything's exactly the way it was, but it's as silent as a cemetery. My joy immediately turns to anxiety. What if something happened to them? What if...

The door flies open. "Lou?" Ethan suddenly appears on the doorstep like a ghost, staring at me with wide eyes, clutching a book in one hand with all his strength.

"Eth..." My voice falters. I can't believe he's really there. Or that I'm really here. Time stands still for several seconds. We simply stare at each other, each wondering whether the other is a figment of our imaginations. I've pictured coming home so many times, but nothing has prepared me for this moment. It's like someone's torn my heart out of my chest, but brought me back to life rather than killing me. It's joy and pain, homesickness and homecoming.

"Ethan," I whisper again.

The book he's holding slips from his hand. "Oh, God, Lou, oh my God!" he shouts and runs over to me. Not three seconds later, he's there, throwing his arms around me, clinging to me, pressing me to his chest. His shoulders are shaking—he's crying harder than I've ever seen another person cry. My heart knots painfully and swells with warmth at the same time. I'm so unbelievably happy. And so unbelievably sad. I wonder how it's possible for a person to feel so

much joy and so much grief at the same time. I wonder whether human hearts are even built to hold this much emotion.

In the distance, I hear more shouts. I peek over Ethan's shoulder and spot Avery, Liam, and Jayden bounding down the stairs. It feels like a dream. Soon they're clustered around me in a circle, squeezing me half to death, only releasing me when I'm gasping for air. Then the four of them just stare at me like I'm a museum exhibit. Tears are running silently down Avery's face; Liam keeps stealthily wiping his eyes, and Jayden's bawling as openly as Ethan. He keeps putting his hand on my arm, touching my fingers, as though he can't believe I'm real.

After a while, they start talking all at once, but I can't get a word out. I'm too overwhelmed. Not just with joy at seeing them again, but with a deep gratitude that also makes me sad. Brendan was right. He made the right choice. For me. For my family. And I love him even more for it.

CHAPTER 25

I set the table with our best dishes, the white ones with the silver rims that used to be Mom's. The turkey's in the oven, full of cornbread-and-nut stuffing, and the whole house smells like meat, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pie. It's Thanksgiving. And I'm thankful for so many things. One of them is my period, which I got four weeks after returning home.

Two months have passed since the night I came back. Two months of me catching myself just standing there not sure what I was about to do next. Two months of doing things and then not remembering when or how I did them. Two months that have felt like half a century. And not one day, not one hour, not one second of those two months didn't involve me missing Brendan.

The first few weeks were the worst. It was bad enough having to scramble to fill in the huge gaps I didn't spot in my story—like how unlikely it was that three girls who all wanted to run away from home would randomly bump into each other at the Sequoia National Park visitors' center. Or why I didn't call as soon as I was all over the news. Or where exactly we traveled. I managed to find more or less plausible explanations for everything, but it was stressful.

Compared to Ethan's reaction, though, it was a walk in the park.

When he heard what I'd done, he slapped me for the first time in his life. He hasn't spoken to me since—except for during tutoring sessions, which he still gives me, but his voice is completely cold and

I can sense his hostility in every gesture he makes. Avery's always trying to mediate between us, but his efforts have been in vain.

I take the orange napkins out of the cupboard with a sigh. He'll probably try to get us to kiss and make up again tonight. *Guys, it's Thanksgiving, can't you just get along already?* I already know it won't work. I hurt Ethan too deeply. And I deserved that slap. I feel so guilty. I could have saved him that final week or two of pain by calling for help at the river. And if Ethan knew I was kidnapped, he wouldn't be beating himself up about how strict he used to be. Avery tells me Ethan blames himself for this, at least mostly. But he's also doing everything the same way he always did—a leopard can't change his spots, as they say.

I fold the napkins into little flowers and set them on the plates. Maybe it'll be good for us to eat dinner all together tonight, whether Ethan's speaking to me or not. Liam's been spending more and more time on his own lately. His hair's nearly to his waist now, and he's woven pearls into his beard. He should probably spend more time living and less time meditating.

I frown at the table. Something's missing. Oh, right, the candles. I put them in the holders, but then I left them in the hallway. I want to make everything as beautiful as possible tonight, for Avery's sake. He's been in the kitchen cooking for us since this morning. Now he's finally slipped out to take a shower, and I know that when he gets out, he'll smell like Wild Ocean Dream, the blue soap.

I have to stop for a moment and get the trembling in my hands under control. That always happens whenever something reminds me of Brendan. I stand there for a few seconds, lost in my memories. For the hundredth time at least, I wonder why he went to the trouble of getting that soap and tracking down my whole wardrobe. It bugs me that I never asked. In retrospect, I think he must have done it so I would feel at home. He wanted everything to be the way it is here. I guess he should have kidnapped my brothers, too. The thought of the six of us crammed into a camper together actually makes me smile. I wonder what Brendan's doing right now? Playing with Grey, maybe?

"Hey, Lou." The bathroom door swings open, and my brother comes out, barefoot and smelling of soap. "Table set?"

"Of course. I just forgot these!" I grab the candles and force myself to smile. Maybe I should ask my brothers to change soaps. "Oh, and I think your pumpkin pie may be burning, Chef."

"Whaaat?" Avery raises his hands in the air theatrically and dashes into the kitchen. I know he's doing everything he can to cheer me up. I follow him, smiling, and stand in the doorway watching him. Ever since I started hearing snippets of Brendan's story, ever since I lost the things I took for granted, I've known what an amazing gift I have here. I know Ethan's the main reason we have it so good here, and I'm grateful for that, too... but the truth is, I miss my brother. I miss talking to him.

Once we've taken our seats around the table, where the piping-hot turkey is waiting on its serving tray, surrounded by roasted apples and glazed walnuts, Ethan rises from his chair with a solemn expression on his face. Being a devout Christian, he always wants to say a Thanksgiving prayer; Liam usually leaves the room until he's finished, and Jayden sits there pretending he's going to be sick. This year, though, everyone stays right where they are, listening attentively.

"Lord Jesus." Even Jayden's sitting in silence, looking toward the head of the table, where Ethan is standing in his best shirt and his freshly ironed pants. "Normally, this is the day we give thanks to you for allowing us to share in your bounty. You make sure that our table is always richly laid, that we have work and a place to sleep. But today, we want to thank you for a completely different reason. While Louisa was away, you protected her, day and night, hour after hour. You made sure that no harm came to her, and helped her find her way back to us, safe and healthy. Thank you for allowing us to sit at the same table today... and thank you for the strength you gave us to get through those difficult times." He swallows and looks over at me. I smile tentatively. "We want to thank you... for this second chance. And this time, I want to do better." His eyes are shimmering faintly as he adds, "Amen."

I stand up and hug him, and he holds me close. I'm lost for words all over again.

Jayden isn't, though. "Come on, you guys," he says, "there's a turkey waiting to be eaten here. Can you at least save the waterworks for later this time?"

Everyone laughs.

After dinner, Ethan and I break the wishbone, and I get the bigger piece, so I get to make a wish.

I think about Brendan, and about how much I want to see him again.

Everything's been so much easier since Ethan's started talking to me again. He says he noticed almost immediately how much I've changed. He saw how much I was studying and how much effort I was putting into the tutoring sessions, though I sometimes got exasperated with the material.

I'm not getting into trouble at school anymore, either, and I'm following all the rules he laid out before vacation. The weird thing is, they don't bother me in the slightest. I could care less about Hades in Love now.

Ava and Madison obviously thought it was totally cool that I ran away, while Emma and Elizabeth have been mostly eyeing me warily from a safe distance since they heard the story. The news spread through Ash Springs like wildfire; there was even an article in the paper about my return. One week later, two women came from Child Protective Services to ask me a bunch of questions about my brothers, and to ask my brothers a bunch of questions about me. They told us they'd be visiting us once a month from then on, and suggested I go to the school psychologist, but I haven't gone. I feel so terrible about this whole CPS thing—now everyone thinks Ethan is the bad guy. But I know who I'm doing this for. All I can do is emphasize again and again that this was nobody's fault but mine.

It's early December now, and it feels like time is going faster, because so many things are happening to distract me. Jayden's writing a new story about a girl who runs away from home, so

obviously he has a million questions. Liam surprised us by showing up one day with a trimmed beard and short hair and announcing he'd converted to Christianity and was planning on getting baptized. School is all end-of-semester tests, all the time. I'm getting my first C+ in math. Avery and I are planning Christmas dinner together, plus I have to buy gifts, and once in a while I get together with Emma. I still feel out of place at school, but I'm managing to hide it. I laugh at the right moments, and I act like I'm listening, although my mind is somewhere in Canada.

And then it's Christmas. Liam and I set up a colorful blinking sled and reindeer underneath the apple tree, while Jayden and Avery hang a string of red-and-white candy-cane lights along the roof. The four of us laugh and mess around like kids; only Ethan watches with a slightly disapproving frown. He was against all these kitschy decorations, but after I got my C+ and Liam suddenly converted, he couldn't say no.

Avery takes Christmas Eve off, so we have time to start cooking for the 25th. We're going to serve cream of chestnut soup to start, and then roast goose with red cabbage and dumplings. For dessert, we're doing banana pudding with toasted marshmallows on top.

On the evening of the 24th, Avery and I are totally dead. I've got bits of dumpling dough and pureed chestnut sticking to the ends of my hair. As I'm rinsing it out in the sink, I realize that my hair's finally reached my shoulders again. I give my reflection a melancholy smile and feel a pang in my heart.

"Hey, Lou, hurry up!" Liam calls from the living room. "Hero of the Week's about to start!" I look at myself again. The new me doesn't feel like quite as much of a stranger anymore. Outside and inside match again somehow.

When I come into the living room, my brothers are already gathered around the TV. Even Jayden's here, since he finally finished that short story about the runaway girl earlier today. I squeeze onto the sofa between Ethan and Liam and pick up the bag of chips lying on the table. The second I get it open, Jayden walks over and grabs an enormous handful, then retreats to the Moroccan pouffe ottoman from Dad's wild years.

"I can't believe you still have room to eat anything." Avery blinks at me in amazement. "You ate half the dumpling dough."

"That was you, not me."

"Can you guys be quiet? I can't hear!"

"Jeez, Ethan, you must be crushing pretty hard on David O'Dell." Jayden sighs.

"Shut up."

There's a loud pop.

"Since when do you drink alcohol?" Avery asks Liam, who's putting a freshly opened bottle of beer to his lips.

"Since I became a Christian." Liam grins.

"You're drinking to forget, huh?"

"Be quiet already, Jay."

"Tell Lou to stop chewing so loudly, then."

"Lou, don't chew so loudly," Ethan says, sounding defeated. "Now, can we please listen to this? I think they said today's hero is from Canada..."

Everyone goes completely silent immediately. We all watch the images flicker across the screen: a steely blue sky; a wintery forest full of snow-covered pines, spruces, and larches; a single blackbird soaring above the treetops; a grey-green river. In the background, a mountain range rises majestically into the heavens.

I recognize everything. Of course it's not exactly the same area, but it looks just how that part of Canada would in winter. My mind wanders to the lake singing itself to sleep as it hibernates. I swallow my mouthful of chips with some difficulty.

"Today's Hero of the Week comes from the lonely Yukon Territory in Canada," I hear David O'Dell say. The once-shy moderator smiles confidently into the camera. "Some people think of the Yukon as a place for hermits and eccentrics, but the Great Frozen North is also a land of myth and mystery, of wisdom dating back thousands of years. The original inhabitants believed that the raven brought the sun each morning, and that bears had souls most similar to our own."

"Did you learn that on your trip, too?" Jayden crunches his chips way too loudly.

I don’t respond. I go right on staring at the television, mesmerized.

“Today’s guest may be a lone wolf of sorts, but he’s definitely a hero as well. At the age of just twenty-two, he’s already saved five lives. Please join me in welcoming Brendan Connor.”

Brendan?

I barely register the euphoric applause as the hero steps through the door into the studio. My hand flies to my heart. Bren! No, that’s impossible. I close my eyes and open them again. It’s still Bren. He looks so familiar, in his old dark-brown cargo pants and his black hoodie. It’s like I just saw him yesterday, just touched him yesterday. My throat tightens, and my hands start shaking wildly. I’m totally helpless against the pain and the longing ambushing me from the shadows. A storm of bittersweet memories rolls over me. Involuntarily, I crumple the bag of chips into a ball as I try and fail to follow what the moderator’s saying. I half-hear something about Bren having saved a five-person family from a grizzly attack, but mostly I’m focused on other things: the way he keeps shyly averting his eyes, seemingly embarrassed at all this attention; the way he’s trying to get out of the blinding spotlight by stepping further and further away from the moderator. Mentally, I tell him to be strong, and I wonder if he knows I’m watching. Yeah, I’m sure he knows, or at least he’s hoping.

A strange feeling comes over me as I watch him and David O’Dell. What if he doesn’t want me anymore? What if, now that he’s Hero of the Week, hundreds of people start sending him offers of marriage?

I’m squeezing the bag so hard that the chips are probably crumbs.

“Jeez, he’s got some balls,” Jay snorts admiringly. “Yells at a hungry bear to distract it, without first figuring out where he’s gonna escape to?”

“What would he have done if he hadn’t made it up the tree?” Liam adds. “Hallelujah!”

“And then he carries that dude for miles and miles through the ice and snow so he won’t bleed to death... Hey, Lou, throw the chips

over."

Mechanically, I stretch out my hand, and Jay takes the bag.

"The hell? They're totally smushed!"

I can't reply. I can't take my eyes off Brendan.

"So, Brendan," David O'Dell says, "among all of our many Heroes of the Week, do you have a personal favorite that you think ought to win Hero of the Year?"

"Not a hero, a heroine," he replies quietly, and then turns to look into the camera for the first time. "She was never on this show, but she did save my life."

David O'Dell beams. "A hero saved by someone else? Sounds interesting. Who is she?"

The camera zooms in on Brendan's face, so that it fills the entire screen. I see his pupils dilating, flooding the brown of his eyes—like he's looking at me. Before I realize it, I'm clutching the silver coin on my necklace.

"A girl from Nevada. She showed me that I'm not quite as bad of a person as I always thought. She believed in me when I had stopped believing in myself." He clears his throat briefly. "She brought sunlight into to my darkness, and showed me that grey is really just silver that doesn't shine. And I want to thank her for that, because it's the only reason I'm here today."

I must have made some kind of noise, because I feel all of my brothers giving me sidelong glances. Jayden especially. I can hear him practically grinding the chips in his hand to flour. The cameraman zooms in even closer, probably sensing that this is the love story of the year. Bren's eyes are shimmering. I can only imagine how difficult this is for him.

"When we parted ways, she wanted me to make her a promise. At the time, I wasn't sure whether I could keep it, but today..." He swallows so hard that his Adam's apple bulges out. "I want her to know that I'm in therapy and... and that I'll be here waiting for her whenever she's ready to give me another chance."

The image on screen blurs into a wet veil. The pain of having lost him gives way to an immense feeling of joy and longing that hurts

just as much, maybe more, but in a different way. He wants to try. He still wants me.

As if in a trance, I get up and walk to my room. I can't stay in there with my brothers, not right now. I throw myself on the bed, and through the closed door, I hear the moderator summarizing the past month.

The things Bren said about me wash through my head as the tears stream down my face. When I got home nearly four months ago, I knew that he'd made the right choice—for me. But now I understand that he made the right choice for us, too. Because now I know that my feelings are real. They're not Stockholm syndrome, they're not sick or abnormal. I would have fallen in love with him anyway; he just made it unnecessarily hard on himself by kidnapping me. I lie there for a while, staring at the ceiling, but all I can see are colors and mental snapshots of our summer together. I miss the forest and the scent of pine needles, I miss Grey and the cool morning air. The scent of firewood. I miss Bren. June is so far off.

The minute the closing credits music starts, Jay barges into my room without knocking, and slams the door shut behind him. "Grey is silver that doesn't shine?" He raises an eyebrow at me—curious, not angry. "A girl from Nevada?"

I straighten up, already trying to figure out how to talk my way out of this, but I can't come up with anything on the spot. "Jayden..."

"I never *did* buy that story about the two girls."

I stare at him in horror. There are still tears in my eyes, so I can only see his blurry outline. "Why not?"

"The answers you gave me... none of it really sounded like you." One corner of his mouth quirks upward. "Can I sit?"

"Sure." I pat the blanket invitingly.

He drops down beside me, then scoots back to the wall and puts his feet on the edge of the bed. "Okay, little sister. Who's Brendan Connor, and what did you do with him?"

Suddenly, it's all too much for me. I'm desperate to share my secret with someone else, to have someone else know what I went through, how terrified I was at first with Bren, and how that fear

turned to trust and then love. I want to have someone nearby that I can cry to, someone who will understand me.

Weird—I never thought it would be Jayden. I always figured I'd end up telling Avery, many years from now. Then again, Jayden's the one who loves crazy stories.

"You can't tell anyone," I say now. "You have to swear."

"Hm." Jay regards me indecisively. "Did he do something bad? Or did you?"

"He did."

Jayden's expression darkens.

Hastily, I shake my head. "Not the way you think."

He doesn't look convinced.

"Really," I add emphatically.

His face relaxes again, and then he nods slowly. "Okay, I swear."

"And you have to promise me something else."

"What?"

"You have to drive me to Sequoia National Park on June 25th."

He gives me a baffled look.

"Without the others finding out. And then, once I'm gone, you can tell them everything. The whole truth."

"Lou, what are you talking about? What do you mean, when you're gone? I'm not driving you somewhere so you can disappear again. You're out of your mind."

"I just want the summer."

Jayden sighs. "I probably don't really want to hear this story, do I?"

I smile, and the question makes me think of Brendan. Under different circumstances, with different pasts, I bet Brendan and Jay would have gotten along great. I clasp Bren's silver coin.

"Is that from him?" Jay eyes it quizzically.

I nod and hold the charm out. "He has this design tattooed on his back, too. This coin used to belong to his mom."

"Cool."

"But sad, too." I let the pendant drop and take Jay's hand. I'm going to need it—otherwise I'll never find the words to describe everything that happened to me.

CHAPTER 26

I stuff my suitcase into the trunk of Liam's old wreck of a car. Jayden's already behind the wheel. Before I get in, I take one last look over my shoulder. Our house is only partly visible through all the sagebrush. It's five in the morning; the sun will be up in half an hour, but we'll be long gone by then.

I think about the three letters under my pillow—one to Ethan, one to Avery, and one to Liam. Jayden and I have agreed that he'll hand them out when he gets back and tell them the whole story.

It took me two months to convince Jayden not to take back his promise. "What if you want to leave and he won't let you?" he asked. "All over again? What if this whole thing is some big, elaborate ruse, like he kidnaps a girl once a year and keeps her there until she's in love with him?"

I asked myself that same question at first, but that was before New Year's Eve, when I saw Bren on TV.

I've got my phone with me to ease Jayden's mind, but I doubt I'll get reception anyway. He's also going to insist that Bren tell him the exact location of his property, so that he knows where to find me in case of emergency. "Somewhere in Canada" likely won't cut it.

I slide into the passenger seat, and Jayden drives away. We don't talk much on the road. After a while, he turns on the radio, and we both hum along. The distraction helps a little, but my head is still pure chaos. What if Bren doesn't show up? What if he stopped going

to therapy? What if he's met some other girl? What if he shows up just to tell me that he'd rather not see me again? What if he wants a fresh start?

I don't know what I'd do then.

I roll down the window and stick my hand out. The silken Mojave Desert wind blows through my splayed fingers, tickling my skin and filling me with a crazy feeling of freedom and joy. No, he'll be there. I know it. I close my eyes and picture the way we made love on the sand beneath the willow tree, the way our bodies fit into one another—two halves forming a perfect whole. I remember his kisses, remember the sweet sensations flowing through me. I can't believe I was ever afraid those memories would fade.

By noon, we're barely halfway there, because a truck full of oranges tipped over on the street in front of us. I'm starting to get nervous that Bren will think I'm not coming. Maybe the waiting will be too much for him, and he'll leave early. I keep glancing at the clock, watching time slip away from me. Three in the afternoon already? Jay starts getting annoyed with me fidgeting around in my seat, constantly begging him to drive faster. Eventually he threatens to throw me out of the car and drive the rest of the way alone, so I force myself to be quiet until he finally, finally reaches the entrance to the national park. It's four o'clock now, but that visitor's center is somewhere in the middle of the park, at one of the highest points in the area. Why didn't we leave earlier? But it only took seven hours to get here last time, so 5 AM seemed like it would be plenty.

Liam's old Ford struggles up the serpentine roads, but soon the engine starts to smoke, and Jay pulls into a lay-by.

"Are you serious?" I moan, throwing the door open angrily and stomping around to the hood, which is steaming like a locomotive.

"We've gotta let it cool off for a second, Lou. Otherwise it'll break down." Jay gets out and starts checking the car over. "Not far now."

"We should have taken Ethan's car. The visitors' center's going to close."

"Nah, it's open late. It was dusk, don't you remember?" Jay gives me a pointed look from across the open hood.

How could I forget? Every second of that day is burned into my mind forever. I don't say that aloud, though.

By the time the engine has cooled off "for a second," it's five thirty. I'm near tears. The narrow street goes on forever, up and up... speed limit 15! After a hundred and thirty-seven more curves or so, smoke starts rising from the hood again. Jayden sets his jaw grimly and keeps pushing the car onward. If we take another break as long as the first one, we'll definitely be too late.

After what seems like a thousand years, I'm close to a nervous breakdown, and the engine isn't just smoking, it's also rattling... and then the Lodgepole sign finally comes into view. The car crawls across the line marking the boundaries of the parking lot. The visitors' center is directly ahead.

Hastily, I sweep my gaze across the lot. My hands are clammy. I only see a couple of vans and a station wagon.

Jayden parks the wheezing car directly in front of the visitors' center. "Do you want to go in alone?"

I just nod. My heart is hammering like crazy. What if Bren isn't here? I stay seated for a moment, taking deep breaths.

"Lou, before you go... there's something you probably ought to know." My brother regards me with a solemn expression on his face. "I wasn't sure if I was going to tell you or not, but it's probably better if you know."

"What?" I turn to face him, forcing myself to focus on him.

"You know how you showed me that coin you got from this Brendan guy?" He taps his hands against the steering wheel in agitation.

"What about it?"

"I decided to do some searching, and I ended up on this online artists' forum, and I found this crafts shop in Albuquerque..."

I give him a look of outrage. "You went searching for him online and didn't tell me?"

"When my sister asks me to bring her back to a guy who kidnapped her and kept her in a box for five days last year, it seems like the least I can do."

"Well, what did you find out?" This is giving me a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. I turn to look at the entrance to the visitors' center.

"The shop belongs to an old friend of Brendan's mom's. I know because I drove out there one weekend to meet her." He pauses briefly. "I had to tell her a little bit about you, otherwise she wouldn't have told me anything."

"That's okay," I say, swallowing the lump in my throat. I can't believe he did all of this behind my back! Then again... I know how much I'm asking of him right now. "What did she say?"

"Not a whole lot. She designed that coin at Brendan's mom's request, and then she liked the motif, so she made a few more." His eyes bore into me. "Brendan's dad—well, stepdad, actually—it sounds like he was a total psycho, like, seriously sick in the head. He was a coffin-maker from Oklahoma, and he beat the crap out of Brendan's mom, really tortured her. When he discovered he wasn't Brendan's biological father, he apparently locked her in a coffin and threatened to bury her alive in the yard."

My heart is seizing up. So I was right about what happened to Brendan. I shift my gaze back to the entrance as Jayden continues.

"Brendan's mom escaped the first chance she had, and went to stay with her friend the jewelry designer. She went that same day to pick Brendan up from preschool, but he was already gone—I guess his stepdad found out she'd left, so he pulled Brendan out of school. She called him and told him she'd call the cops to help her get her son back, but he told her he'd kill Brendan if she tried, and then he simply disappeared. To L.A., I guess, if that's where Brendan told you he grew up. Anyway, Brendan's stepdad called his mom over and over again, reiterating the threat. He was a total sadist, using the son to make the wife miserable. She spent years searching for them, trying to get Brendan back, but no luck, obviously. Finally, I guess she died of a broken heart."

I swallow hard. So Brendan's mother really didn't abandon him. I can't even begin to imagine what that will mean to Brendan. I look at Jay. "Why are you only telling me this stuff now?"

He exhales slowly. “I wasn’t sure if I should tell you at all. If this guy had wanted to know anything about his own past, he could have just as easily gone searching for it himself. Telling you means now you have to decide whether to tell him or not.”

“He was probably afraid of what he might find out. He was trying to just forget the whole thing.” I glance at the entrance yet again. I’m so scared that he’s changed his mind.

“Do you think you’ll tell him?” Jayden asks.

“Well, he has to show up first.”

Jay’s hand brushes mine. “Lou. Go inside and check. Maybe he’s already in there, and he parked somewhere else.”

So Jay’s noticed, too. “Or he came in a different car?” I say, trying to reassure myself.

“Or that!”

“Okay. Back in a bit.” I hop out of the car and shut the door behind me. For a moment, I just stand there, pondering Jay’s story. In principle, it doesn’t change much of anything. More than anything, it confirms what I’d already guessed. And of course Brendan needs to know this stuff about his mom... but maybe not immediately, I mean, I don’t even know how he’s doing yet.

Still standing beside the car, I cast a look around the parking lot. It’s twilight already, just like it was last year. There’s that same familiar scent of pine needles and smoke. I relive the moment I decided to walk to Brendan’s camper with him. I feel the wind on my face, hear the trees rustling and Bren’s keys jingling and the camping lanterns clacking in his hand. A hot-and-cold shiver runs down my back: joy, fear, nostalgia. For the hundredth time, I realize to my continued astonishment that I’m not sure when exactly I fell in love with Brendan, when trusting him suddenly turned into more. I take one more long, deep breath, letting it out slowly, and then step through the open glass door.

Warmth envelops me. Suddenly, it feels like it was just yesterday that I came in here searching for camping lanterns. The wood paneling, the shop, the information stands, they’re all exactly the way I remember them. I stop at the clothing rack full of hoodies, lost in thought. I’m still too nervous to check the whole store, because

I'm terrified to find out that I came all this way for nothing. *Please let him be here*, I pray silently. *Please, please let him be here, or if he's not here yet, let him come here.*

Without realizing it, I've wandered into the alcove with the camping gear. I reach for the bear spray. I bet it really does do something. He engineered that whole encounter with such finesse. I turn the can over in my hand, but the printed information on the back blurs in front of my eyes. He's not coming. I know it. If he's in therapy, working through the stuff Jay was telling me about, I'm sure his therapist has told him he shouldn't see me again. It might even make his old dangerous thought patterns come out again, and then he'll relapse, the way alcoholics do. And then maybe he'll have to kidnap another girl, just to get that confirmation of her love.

I bite my lips hard. I should go. There's no point in standing here torturing myself any longer. If he'd been planning on coming here, he'd be here by now. He'd have been waiting in the lot for me.

Dazed, I set the spray back on the shelf. It would have been too perfect if he'd arrived at this exact moment, stepped into this same alcove where we had our first conversation.

I raise my head and take a long look around the store. My heart is thumping hard in my chest. Brendan's tall, there's no way I wouldn't see him over the shelves, and the only other people in here are two guys in army-green caps and a couple of girls my age. Should I ask the guy running the register if he's seen Brendan? *Um, excuse me, did last year's Hero of the Week 52 come through here by chance? By the way, I'm that girl who disappeared in the park...*

It's seven thirty now. The visitors' center is closing in half an hour.

Eyes burning, I glance toward the information area, and then over to the other exit, the one leading to the showers. He's not there, either.

I try to fight back my disappointment, but it rolls over me like an avalanche. My whole body is numb, deadened. He didn't come. My memories will be all I have left of the time we spent together. When I said goodbye to him in that parking lot in British Columbia, it was goodbye forever. Why didn't I give him one more hug? Why didn't I

kiss him? I turn a complete circle, still searching. I just don't want to believe it... but that doesn't change anything about the fact that he isn't here.

Finally, I give up once and for all. Head lowered to hide my tears, I start for the exit.

Suddenly, a piercing howl comes from the direction of the back entrance, followed by loud barking. Someone screams.

"Hey, mister, you can't bring a wolf—"

"Lou! Lou, wait!"

Bren! My heart skips a beat and then restarts at full gallop. A giant boulder rolls away from my soul, releasing thousands of golden butterflies that lift me into the air. He's here!

"If you don't take that wolf out of h—"

"—s'cuse me, so sorry about this—"

Before I've even finished turning around, Grey leaps up and knocks me to the floor. Then he clambers onto me and licks my face. I pull his head in and hug him, stroke his fur. Tears well up in my eyes again, this time tears of joy. I push Grey aside a little with one hand and sit up.

Brendan's standing there in cargo pants and a hoodie. His face is thin and solemn, but his eyes gleam from somewhere deep down, some light hidden away inside him.

"You came," he says quietly, helping me to my feet. He seems like he's barely managing to keep himself under control. I want to tell him it's okay to cry, but I know he doesn't want to hear that, so I just squeeze his fingers.

"You doubted I would?"

He smiles, and I can see the tension falling away from him more and more. "Been doubting it all day."

My lips are trembling. "I didn't think you'd be there. We got a flat tire, and a truck tipped over, and there were these stupid oranges all over the damn street..."

He laughs, but it sounds like it's masking a sob, one that releases the rest of his pent-up fear. "I arrived yesterday, actually. I've been here since this morning." He takes hold of Grey's collar and casts a reassuring glance at the man behind the counter. "I had Grey tied up

out there earlier, but he got loose—I had to run and catch him." His pupils get huge, and I feel the time we spent apart melting away to nothing. His eyes are like a butterfly net, catching me for the second time in my life. There's so much I want to say to him, but we have the whole summer for that.

I walk over to him and slide my arms around his waist. "I never want to be away from you again, Bren. Never."

He presses me close, buries his face in my hair. "You won't have to, Lou. Promise."

And then we kiss, cautiously and tenderly like it's the first time. A tingling wave washes over my skin like bubbles of air, making me shiver. His lips feel the way they did under the willow tree: wild-gentle, bittersweet. They're joy and pain, the calm and the storm.

We stand there for a long moment, wrapped up in one another, until the guy at the cash register threatens to call the rangers if we don't take the wolf out of the store this minute.

When we reach the parking lot, Jayden is waiting by the car. He's trying to act casual, but I can tell he's eyeing Bren carefully, taking in as much information as he can. Finally, he gives me a long goodbye hug.

Before we leave, he turns to Brendan with a grim look on his face. "If you hurt her again, I'll kill you."

Bren just nods, taking my hand. Then he whistles to Grey, who's busy sniffing Liam's car. This time, the wolf trots over immediately. He's full-grown now, with icy grey fur that's nearly silver, and his blue eyes have turned a deep honey color.

"He stayed with you," I marvel. I really did think it was only a matter of time until Grey wandered into the forest and didn't come back.

Bren claps Grey on the back with his free hand. I can sense the deep connection between them. "We had a couple pretty serious fights before he finally understood who's in charge around here." He looks at me. "The camper's a little ways off," he adds almost apologetically. "They wouldn't let me park it here all day."

I just smile and start across the parking lot with him. I know we're going to be okay, even though it won't be easy to forget the

past. I know that the light of the future will cast shadows, too.

Right now, though, it feels like the past and the future are one moment, intersecting here and now, between the light and the shadows—weightless, like spreading wings preparing to soar away. I look around. Reddish-gold rays of sunlight filter through the gathering blue-grey clouds, and the long, dark band of sequoias at the edge of the parking lot stretch far into the distance. It'll be pitch dark here soon.

It's just how it was back then. The first time.

Bren glances over at me, and the red sunlight dances in his eyes.

I remember the question I saw in those eyes a year ago, the one he was only asking me in his heart.

Do you want this?

I know the answer now.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A few attentive readers have pointed out that the episodes Brendan experiences wouldn't fit the textbook definition of flashbacks. They're absolutely correct: Brendan calls them flashbacks because he doesn't know any better. His deep-seated psychological trauma has caused him to develop dissociative disorder. Book 2 of the series (*Trapped: Until the Darkest of Night*) gives more details about this highly complex condition.

TRAPPED: UNTIL THE DARKEST OF NIGHT

UNDER NORTHERN SKIES 2

PROLOGUE

I had wanted to die that day, back then, in that freezing Canadian winter. I remember the cold wind blowing down the mountainside, the sky a steel blue without a single cloud in sight. Then, I saw you—and you touched me. Something about you told me that it was too soon to give up. I swear, Lou, I had no idea what it was. If I had known, back then in that freezing winter in Canada, I would never have abducted you. This you have to believe me.

At first, I thought it was your eyes, your deep northern sky-blue eyes that seemed as innocent as new life. They expressed freedom —or so I wanted to believe.

Or maybe it was your hair and the way it caught the sunlight. These days, it's hard to say, it all happened so long ago.

Still, Lou…it was so much more. It was all nothing compared to what I found in you. Today, I wish I never had found you because then looking back wouldn't hurt so much.

I wish you could still be that laughing blonde girl who spun around in her white dress in the garden in Ash Springs. And I, the boy who only knows darkness.

After all, darkness protects us from the things we don't want to remember.

But how could I not remember you?

CHAPTER 1

There's only wind. Then nothing. Not even me. Only the Chinook winds slashing across the jagged ridges like the howling of a pack of wolves.

For a moment, I look around confused. Disoriented, like I've lost all my memories, I'm standing in the middle of frozen-over Quiet Lake.

That's been happening quite often lately. I keep forgetting what I was going to do, sometimes even losing my train of thought. Maybe I've been alone for too long, too in tune with the wild so that all my thoughts fade. Images of the steel-blue sky, conifers, cold, and the wind are all that's left.

My gaze wanders over the edge of the snow-covered spruce trees along the shore. Gusts bend their tops and handfuls of snow trickle from their branches and atomize into millions of crystals in the air. Still, this pure white beauty leaves me untouched.

For a moment, I tread in place. The snow-covered ice crunches under my feet as if it might crack open at any second. What would it be like, breaking through the ice at six degrees? How long before I'd freeze to death? Or would I drown?

Was that what was going through my mind before I drew a blank? I open and close my cold fingers in my lined gloves before I pull my wool hat lower over my face.

Less than thirty feet from me is the hole I had hacked in the ice so I can easily scoop water in wintertime. Next to it are two buckets with my ax in between.

Suddenly, my thoughts become clearer again and I remember all the things I meant to do today. I must make a list of supplies since I opened the last can of carrots yesterday. I also wanted to crank up the chainsaw and cut up the felled spruce tree behind the cabin into logs so I'd have enough firewood in case I get sick. I also planned to fix the leaky roof and just now I was about to break open the hole in Quiet Lake again so I can get to the water, since closer to shore the lake is frozen solid to the bottom.

I glance over my shoulder at the log cabin above the low embankment. My tasks seem insurmountable, akin to ascending Mount McKinley. Doing things for tomorrow, even thinking about tomorrow, crushes me. Tomorrow will be like today. Empty and lonely. There is no escaping my life. Never has been.

Colder than the sub-zero temperatures, a darker shudder grips me, whispers of mute horror and never-forgotten fear. Sometimes, I think things get particularly bad in winter. Not only the shadowy sense of dread but also the loneliness. When the cold silently covers the land like a cloak of ice, I think of Christmas and New Year's Eve, of happily reunited families in festive living rooms, turkey with chestnuts, sweet potato casserole, and about all the moms and dads who shower their kids with mountains of gifts as if there's no tomorrow.

I keep walking away from the cabin, away from the hole in the ice, further out onto the lake. Last week's harsh temperature fluctuations caused the ice in the back to break. The sheets are close together and look like a white mosaic.

Maybe it would be best if the ice beneath me broke. Nature would swallow me. Nobody would miss me and I wouldn't miss anything. And I wouldn't have to think about Jordan, the monster, or happy families.

I've been here since November, in the middle of the great solitude of the Yukon. I haven't seen a soul, not even during the

summer. When was the last time I saw a human? Eight months ago? Nine?

The ice beneath my black boots creaks like a row of decaying floorboards. It's still firm, apart from the southern part of the lake where water oozes over the mosaic sheets like lymph from a wound. Shivering, I wrap my arms around myself and run.

The hard resistance under my feet gives way to the feeling of swaying wooden boards. It occurs to me that I now have a good reason to stop. Unlike before. Then again, the danger is like an undertow and my inner self seems to be one with nature. The rift in my soul is as great as the fracture between ice and water.

Images well up inside of me. Images of the gray lake that draw me into their depths as if they had a will of their own.

So dark… I can't hear anything anymore. Can't see anything… Breathe, breathe. Mom, it's so dark…

I don't know where this childish voice came from, but it haunts me like an echo. When I give in to this voice, I slip into the abyss, into the unknown, which robs me of all memories every time without ever truly letting me forget.

I jump from one ice floe to the next, the gullies in between are wider than they first looked. The snow covering the frozen lake is being carried away by the water here and I can catch a glance at the bubbles in the ice below the gray-green water. I close my eyes.

So dark… Mom…where are you?

A soft cracking sound pulls me back to the present. I stop dead in my tracks and peer down at my feet. There is a fine crack in the transparent ice floe between my boots. I wait for it to rupture with fascination and horror. My breath paints itself as a white cloud in the air. Nothing happens except for the floe drifting away from the others like a raft. I would now have to jump far to find my footing again.

Should I stay put? Everything goes away then. The emptiness, the darkness. The loneliness.

The ground beneath me begins to sway from right to left and back. I instinctively stretch my arms out to the side for balance, but I'm too heavy and my weight pushes the plate down. Ice water

floods my boots, but it doesn't matter. My boots disappear under the opaque surface of the water. A few bubbles rise to the top. I'm not doing anything, just looking down. The gray water stares back like a dead man's eye. *So dark…so deep beneath the earth…*

Suddenly, there is only panic. Without thinking, I prepare to jump onto the neighboring ice floe, praying the thin ice will withstand the force of the jump. Then it cracks again. The ice breaks.

Something heavy is pulling me down. It's so cold I can't breathe. My arms flail in the air. Everything happens way too fast. Reflexively, I thrust my torso forward, toward the saving slab of ice while pressing my foot against a portion of the sinking floe. I catch the edge of the thick neighboring slab, grab hold of it, and hoist myself onto my forearms. My legs burn from the cold, but I manage to lift one knee onto the firm layer of ice. Panting, I push myself forward, inch by inch until I'm lying flat on the ice. Exhausted, I roll onto my back. The blue sky turns red and seems to come toward me like a scarf flapping in the wind.

I can't feel anything anymore, only my racing heart pounding in my ears.

For a few seconds, I don't dare move. I fixate on the unsettling groans of the ice, waiting for the inevitable rupture beneath me, but there is no other sound to break the silence except for the Chinook.

Eventually, I slowly raise my head and examine the sheet I saved myself on. It is thick and strong. I'm not going to drown, nor freeze to death, if I get up now and start moving.

After a few deep breaths, I carefully heave myself to my feet. My clothes are soaked through and already freezing in the air, and I'm not just shivering from the cold. I'm dizzy from what I had just attempted. With trembling hands, I shade my eyes and gaze out across the white landscape toward the mountains, the crests of which stand out distinctly against the blue sky.

Nothing has changed. The air is fresh and pure like nowhere else in the world, yet I don't care. I feel nothing.

I shake my head as if to banish the gloomy thoughts and walk back.

During the next few minutes, I hack open the water hole, mechanically fill the buckets with water, and carry them toward the cabin. My lungs ache as I breathe, my clothes are frozen stiff, reminding me with every step how close I am to losing my mind.

How could I have ventured so far out onto the lake?

Something must happen, I just don't know what. Only one thing is clear to me: If I don't get a hold of myself, I won't survive the winter.

Inside the cabin, I set the filled water buckets on the plywood floor and stand in the low room. The sun is low over the mountain range and colors the peaks in glowing reds. I glance at the clock. Four p.m. How much time have I actually spent out there on the lake?

I can't start the chainsaw at dusk, let alone climb onto the roof to patch the leak with new slats but I could check my supplies. Still undecided, I look at the door that leads to the annex and sink to the floor. It's cold and damp and a glance at the thermometer shows me a room temperature of fifty-three degrees. I should throw some logs in the wood-burning stove, but I can't even bring myself to do that. Taking off my shoes and frozen pants wouldn't be a bad idea, either. Or the hat and gloves.

Still, I just sit there with my back against the logs and stare out the glass front. The sun sinks lower and lower and the sky turns into a gray sea with wisps of orange and pink clouds.

Maybe it would have been better if I had never discovered this cabin. The people who leased the property before me and built the cabin must have been a couple. Everything comes in pairs of two. The only room on the lower floor has two handmade wooden chairs and a simple table. The patchwork sofa with two sagging seats is placed behind a trunk with a smoothly sanded surface that serves as a coffee table. When I first found the cabin, there were even two plates on it. The rung ladder next to the couch leads to a bunk lined with two animal pelts. It's so big that I feel lost in it, so I crash on the couch.

Tired, I put my head in my hands, smell my wet gloves, and think of the work I didn't get done. Life would definitely be more comfortable in a residential area. And easier. I've spent the last two winters in Faro, a town with no more than five hundred inhabitants. After the summer months in the RV, being close to others almost felt like relief. I only had to go to the supermarket to reassure myself that I wasn't the only person in the world. But even that didn't go down well.

I push the budding memory away. I don't want to think about my flashbacks.

With difficulty, I heave myself up and force my body to be active. I mentally tell myself what to do, like I've done on so many nights. First, I change my clothes and hang the wet items on a hook at the entrance. Then, I heat the water in the kettle, make tea from peppermint leaves and throw a few spruce logs on the paltry fire.

After the sun has set, I light the three oil lamps that hang from the ceiling like hanging baskets. For a moment, I consider drawing but can't find energy left even for this.

Everything seems pointless. During the first few weeks, I got the cabin in shape, which I was able to do even in the twilight, but that work is now finished.

Far too early in the evening, I go to the pantry to choose my dinner. I really should make a new inventory list or I might end up eating elk goulash and rice for a month. Right now, I can't even bring myself to care about that.

I grab a can of venison goulash and a can of peas at random and heat both up on the gas stove. I eat but hardly taste anything. I keep looking outside. By now, millions and millions of stars blanket the sky—they glitter and twinkle like winner-confetti made of gold and silver. I've never seen as many stars in Los Angeles as in the Yukon. I think Canada's sky would make any girl's heart beat faster.

Girls' hearts…the words sound strange. Kind of foreign, maybe even extraterrestrial. *Girls' hearts*. It sounds so absurd I shake my head at myself. I've truly been alone for too long to think about stuff like that.

While doing the dishes, I catch myself thinking about that expression over and over again. Perhaps I'm truly going insane now.

A solid three hours of staring outside go by before I finally give in to my urge and grab the old laptop from out of the top kitchen cupboard.

Maybe I should just check out some girls. Maybe this will help me feel better. Last winter in Faro, I did that to distract myself from my miserable life, even if it didn't change anything. Maybe some pretty girls will cheer me up a little tonight.

With that thought in mind, I carry the generator outside and pull the starter cord. Luckily, it doesn't give me a hard time and starts revving right away. The intense smell of gasoline in the night air is disgusting. Covering my nose with my forearm, I roll out the extension cord back to the cabin and squeeze it through the gap in the door. What else needs to be recharged besides the satellite modem and laptop? I think of the battery charger—my flashlight hasn't worked in two days, and the battery-powered ceiling light needs to be tested.

Annoyed that I didn't bring along a multi-outlet, I recharge the devices and batteries one after the other. Afterward, I go outside, switch off the generator, and let it cool down before I store it back in the pantry.

I sit on the floor between the couch and the window, the only spot with a rusty red carpet. Although I have the laptop on my lap, the cold doesn't seem to do its inner workings any good. After the fifth boot crash, I'm tempted to slam the wretched thing against the logs. I resist the urge only because I'm thinking hard about the words *girls' hearts*.

It takes another hour before I'm sitting in front of the white screen with its colorful logo: *Google*.

I feel like an intruder who is trying to get a forbidden glimpse into a strange world. Funny, so far nothing has drawn me back to other people or their world.

For a few seconds, I consider typing *girls' hearts*, but then I type *blondes*. I don't know why, but I prefer blonde hair to brunette hair. Maybe because the blonde appears so innocent, pure. Everything I'm not. I click on *Google Images* and a bunch of photos of good-looking women line up.

Wow—none of them look innocent. Half-open lids, lashes a mile long, the bedroom look. Red lacy bras that reveal more than they cover.

"It seems I have unlimited choices," I whisper to myself. The harsh sound of my voice startles me. When was the last time I spoke, really spoke, not simply in my head? Maybe that's why I feel so shitty because I haven't even heard a real voice.

Again, I look at the blonde women in their skimpy lingerie. Did I accidentally type the word *sex*? *Blondes* and *sex*?

I stare at the photos, strangely unimpressed. Nothing stirs. What is wrong with me? I no longer even feel anything when I look at hot women? Maybe they're simply not my type. I open a new page. The same flood of cheap Barbie copies smile at me, showing me their breasts.

I feel overwhelmed. They remind me of too many Sandys, Mandys, and Candys from back in the day. Groupies who always spoiled the winners after the underground fights. No request was too crazy—the main thing was that they were part of the show and received some of the fame. Even then I didn't know what to talk to them about afterward. You have met my needs and I may have met yours. No idea. A kind of sex to go.

How long has it been now? Two and a half years? Longer? In the middle of the pristine wilderness, the life I've led in the slums seems like a surreal dream. Looking back, I don't even know if it was a good one or a bad one.

I sit back and reach for my cigarettes. As I light one up, I finally register what all these women on the screen are lacking: the truth. They look like mindless dolls. They have no authenticity. They are imitations of something of which they do not even know how it feels.

But how does life feel?

I inhale the smoke. The nicotine clears my brain. I end up typing *girls' hearts*, feeling dirtier than if I had put my hands on the voluptuous blondes.

I click on *images*.

A couple of wacky manga characters stare at me with bulging eyes. Next to them, a group of pubescent teens grins at the camera. On the far left is a picture of the pale, young, vampire movie star. I can't remember his name anymore. I keep clicking *more* and, at some point, I come across a brown-haired girl—the first one who doesn't immediately put me off because she appears so harmless. Preppy ponytail, round face, blue polo shirt. I log on to Facebook and check out her profile. Emma Miller, age sixteen. God, so young. I'll be twenty-two in January. But who cares?

Out of curiosity, I study the information she gave about herself. She likes to read, preferably vampire novels. Her preference makes me snort and wince. That young vampire star probably makes her little girl's heart beat faster. I don't know why this suddenly makes me so angry.

I stub out the cigarette, still staring at the screen.

All of a sudden, my head is empty. All thoughts are blown away but this time it doesn't feel unhealthy, rather serene. A bit like floating. After a while, I realize that my eyes are fixed on Emma Miller's Facebook header. Not on Emma, though, but on the girl next to her. She has a small oval face, a soft chin, and a sweet mouth. Everything about her is kind of cute, but the most striking feature is her huge, deep blue eyes. Never in my life have I seen such innocent eyes. Bright as the Alaskan sky.

The edges of my field of vision start to blur. Like tunnel vision, I stare at the screen and only see her.

Her blonde hair reaches all the way to her elbows and shines like a shawl of perfectly smooth silk. She holds Emma in her arms.

There is something about her that I can't quite grasp but something about her touches me. I can't say what it is or why it's having such an effect on me. Maybe because she looks like she has nothing to hide from the world. A real sunshine.

A hot, cold shiver crawls down my spine. Brought on by fear or joy? Why should I be afraid? Since when do I even feel such emotions?

I close my eyes for a moment, this girl must be a fantasy. She cannot be real because the emotion I'm experiencing cannot be real.

I blink and she looks at me. My mouth feels bone dry.

"Who are you?" I hear myself whisper, and this time, I'm not startled.

Gradually, I memorize all the details of the photo. The two friends are standing in a dried-up meadow with a simple wooden house on pillars surrounded by endless desert sagebrush in the background. The girl with the blue eyes is wearing an apricot-colored blouse that somewhat clashes with her apple-red cheeks. She's got to be fifteen at most. I try to swallow with my throat still dry and click through Emma's friend list. It's short, so I find the girl quickly:

Louisa Scriver.

Click.

The header is the same as Emma's. I stare at her profile picture. Again, her blue eyes are looking at me, though this time her raspberry lips are tightly closed.

She challenges me, I just don't know how or why. I wipe my face with damp hands. There's that strange feeling again that I can't name. Hot and cold. My stomach tightens.

From one second to the next, I feel sick. The air seems too thin to breathe. I have to get out of here. Immediately! Somehow, I manage to put the laptop down next to me and get to my feet but it's already too late. The logs flicker. Black and white stripes rush by like a scrambled TV program. Everything inside me tightens. I fall, feeling a dull ache in my kneecaps.

No, not now…please, not now… I blink to try and get my bearings, but I'm blind. I feel on the floor with my hands until I eventually encounter resistance. A wall, a lid. Everything collapses onto me. I'm trapped

Panicking, my heart races.

One, two, three, four… I'm not really here anymore. It is so dark…

My ears are buzzing, and somewhere near me, I can hear an agonized whistling like someone squeezing bellows in rapid succession.

Calm down now, breathe! One, two…

But I can no longer breathe. The ground beneath me opens up like a trapdoor and I fall deeper and deeper into a hole with no light and no end. Everything shatters. The environment, time, myself.

The boy knows the basement corridor, every bump on the cold concrete, every stain on the gray walls. Another twenty steps to the door.

"Did I tell you to stop?"

The blow hits him on the back so unprepared that he staggers to the side, scraping his bare shoulder along the rough wall. His skin is torn open, but he hardly feels it.

"No, sir." With an unbearable degree of effort, he forces one foot in front of the other while keeping his eyes fixed on the lightbulb at the end of the corridor. The smell of mold and mildew burns his lungs.

He knows what to expect. He's been through it so many times, and yet, his anxiety still grows each time.

Inconspicuously, he rubs his sweaty hands on his torn pants, feels the crusts of dirt on the thinned fabric: fermented milk from last week, a dried varnish stain from the week before last, wood oil. How long has he been wearing these pants for? He's trying to remember, trying to think of something other than what's behind the door. He doesn't want to reach the end of the hallway. Ever.

Again, the fist hits him in the back to propel him forward.

"I'll teach you what it means to defy me!"

The triangular bump on the concrete floor. Ten more steps.

"Yes, sir." His voice is shaking and he hates himself for it. He doesn't even know what he had done wrong.

He stops in front of the wooden door because the man wants it that way. The man, the monster. The boy feels his damp breath on the back of his neck, he can even smell the whiskey in it—the cheap brand from Walmart. Nausea rises in his throat.

"Look, little shit, what I've got for you!" Reaching over his shoulder, the door is opened.

A moment later, the boy has forgotten all about the stinking breath. He looks silently at the coffin in the middle of the sparsely lit room. The black wooden box stands on a pedestal, perfectly staged to fuel the horror in him. Today, however, it's not only the coffin that makes him shudder but also the hole dug up in the floor next to it.

"Handy, isn't it?" The monster's hand grabs his neck and drags him like a rag doll toward the pit.

He doesn't want to look, but he does it anyway. The hole in the ground is deep and dark and just big enough for the box.

"Convenient, right?" the man behind him yells, and the pressure on the boy's neck is so great that he gets dizzy.

"Yes, sir." A whisper is all he can utter.

The man releases him abruptly but stays close behind him.

The boy looks up. He spots ropes hanging from the ceiling and a winch. Plastic bags are stacked in the corner with the words "potting soil" written on the sides. Bursting burlap sacks are lined up next to each other, a few brown crumbs lying in front of them. All his muscles spasm at the same time as his bladder tries to give way.

Since when has he been storing dirt down here? And when did he dig the pit?

Suddenly, it seems to the boy that there is nothing left in the world but him, this coffin, and the dark hole in the ground. Everything within him grows numb. He hardly notices how he is grabbed again and pushed in front of the coffin. He doesn't know what's happening, this can't be life.

"Open the lid, you piece of shit. Go ahead! Every second you hesitate, I'll make you stay longer, I promise you."

The words are not a threat. The man stands close behind him; his fat belly pushes the boy forward. With trembling hands, he opens

the six metal clasps on the side with thick hinges that make it impossible to pry the lid open from the inside.

"Your mother did this quicker than you."

The words are like electric shocks to the heart. With all his strength, the boy pushes open the wooden lid. His eyes are glued to the ornate embellishments on the front. Rose tendrils on ebony. Just don't look inside.

"That's enough."

The coffin is only half open, but it's enough to climb inside. The smell of cold sweat, urine, and feces wafts toward him.

"If I hear even just a peep from you, I'm going to push the coffin into the pit and dump dirt on it. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you'll die like your miserable mutt."

He clamps his hand over his mouth and tries not to think about Blacky's whimpering when the monster tied his paws together and crammed him into the tiny box. He must not cry. Absolutely not!

The fist hits him again. "Do you want me to give you a beating first?"

"No, sir." He tries desperately to think of something nice. Of his Little Miss Sunshine, of the blonde girl. There was something bright and happy about her that made his heart light. But Little Miss Sunshine is so infinitely far away. He doesn't even know where he saw her. Knees trembling, he climbs into the coffin and lies outstretched, arms pressed to his sides. His big toes touch the wood. He must have grown in the last three weeks. The skin where his sock is ripped immediately gets cold.

"Look at me!"

The boy obeys.

The iron face above him is serious. The man doesn't grin. That scares him. Even more than usual.

"I swear to God, I'll teach you obedience, you little bastard."

"I'm sorry, sir," he hears himself whimper. Momentarily, he really does.

Now the monster is grinning. "You're a pathetic weakling. Your father must have been a total loser!"

The boy clenches his hands. He would like to beat the man, but that would only prolong his punishment.

As the man lowers the lid, he narrows his eyes because he doesn't want to see it getting dark. All he hears is the rubbing of the wood…the clicking of the metal clasps. Click-click-click. Three. Click-click-click. Six.

Then, all is quiet. So quiet. The only thing he hears is his breathing. His chest tightens as if he is crying, but he remains silent and his eyes dry. He blinks. There's nothing but darkness and a putrid stench. He has to think of Blacky. Of his soft fur, his damp muzzle, his warm body. The only warmth he remembers. Blacky made it, he's done with it—all the torment the man put him through for his sake. As if from a great distance, he hears him howling. He swallows. Blinks. If he cries, the man will kill him. Are his eyes wet?

He tries to think about nothing, but it's pointless. His fear rears up like a spooked horse. How long is he going to stay locked up in here this time? A day? Three? One week? Will he be let out in between?

He can hear his hectic breathing, but eventually, his senses switch off. He no longer smells anything, no longer hears anything. Only darkness remains.

It is so vast that there is nothing left of him.

Why did you go away, Mom? Do you hear me? Why did you leave me?

The darkness is everywhere. Also within him.

Maybe that's why his mom ran away. He's a bad person. A bastard. A child whose father didn't want him. Whose mother didn't want him. The blackness is growing thicker. He can't breathe anymore. He shouldn't be breathing anymore. He cannot be loved. Who could ever love him if his mom and dad couldn't? He is nothing. Ashes and dust.

The boy chokes back his tears. It takes all his strength, whatever little strength he has left. Suddenly, there is red fog everywhere, behind his closed eyes, in his head, in his ears and in his fists. Everything is red like blood. Something is happening to him, but he can't say what.

"Step aside," says a strange voice in the red haze, pushing him away. At that moment, everything around him explodes. The darkness, the coffin, his consciousness…

It's like waking up without having slept. The high-pitched whistle I heard earlier fades. After a while, I recognize it as my breath. For a couple of seconds, I just sit there and try to capture some of the images, but it's the same after each flashback. The memories fade before I can look at them. As if they weren't part of me, but part of someone who's gone now. Only vaguely I remember the boy as if I'd seen him in a movie—but I don't recall a single emotion. There's a wall separating us.

Dazed, I wipe my eyes and glance around. I lean against the wall, legs bent. A broken oil lamp lies at my feet. The kerosene has settled in puddles around the shards and next to it I find books scattered across the floor. It looks like a lunatic had pulled them off the shelf and stomped on them.

Before me lies the reason for my self-chosen loneliness. I destroy everything and, afterward, remember nothing. There seems to be an evil inside of me that I can't grasp.

Move aside…

I heard it, didn't I? Frantically, I search for more images, thinking hard about the boy, but he is deaf, blind, and mute. I can't connect with him.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

I bang the back of my head against the wall to use the pain to distract myself from the fear of going insane. The fact that I had another flashback hits me harder than a slap on the neck. I thought that by living in the wild, I would finally get rid of these attacks. No triggers. No flashes. *Damn!* I haul myself upright, relieved that nothing but my head hurts.

Inspecting the cabin, I assess the severity of my blackout. The door to the pantry is still intact—I didn't kick it in. Good! The front door is also fine. Even better! A few pots lie on the floor in front of the tiny countertop. The blue and green plate I ate canned venison

off of today broke. At least I can see colors again. The attack is over and there is no longer any danger that I could lose it again at any moment.

I wipe my forehead with a groan. It is soaked with sweat and swollen in the middle.

Why did it hit me again? And why the hell do I never remember what happened?

I glance around a second time, helpless. I have to clean up the kerosene. Hastily, I throw a kitchen towel on it, my eyes falling on the laptop. The screensaver's bubbles float over the image of the blonde girl who captivated me so earlier.

She still looks at me with her huge blue eyes as if she wants to whisper a secret into my ears.

Little Miss Sunshine. Louisa Scriver.

Sunshine. Sun girl. Alaskan sky.

Did she trigger the flash? And if so, why?

As if in a trance, I approach the computer, overjoyed that I didn't demolish it in my madness. Fuck the oil lamp! I kneel in front of the laptop and pull it closer to me. With a click on the enter key, the dancing soap bubbles disappear.

There's that hot and cold chill inside me again and I still don't know why or what it means.

"Louisa," I say softly. A lovely name for my pretty Little Miss Sunshine. Everything about her is sweet and light.

Something changes inside me but I don't know what it is. It's definitely not another attack because it feels too good for that. Warm and new. Suddenly, I smell the smoke from the stove and the chemical petroleum intensely. The spicy smell of deer meat hangs in between… A few feet away, the burning wood crackles and pops and the Chinook howls over the wooden slats on the roof.

With a strange feeling in my stomach, I look around. The glass of the oil lamp reflects the light of the other lamps. A bright flash fills the room again and again. It looks mysterious, like a magical sign from another world. Why have I never noticed this before?

I get up and take a few steps toward the oil lamp hanging from the ceiling in front of the window. At the same time, my gaze falls

outside. A silver, oversized moon bathes the frozen lake and snow-covered trees in crystal clear light. In the middle, almost next to the water hole, I discover a pack of wolves. I can see at least fifteen of them with black and gray fur.

My heart beats faster. I would love to go outside for a walk across the lake with them. Run. Just run. A few of them stay on the ice while the others move on. Movement on the east bank distracts me from the wolves.

Along the bare aspen, where the embankment is steeper, a beaver darts into its escape tunnel. Another follows. A few partridges flutter up and disappear again into a leafless clump of brush. Two wolves change course.

Nature suddenly appears full of life as if it had awakened early from hibernation.

I look once more at the radiant blonde girl on my laptop, and my stomach clenches with a wondrous feeling.

Maybe it’s not nature coming to life, maybe I finally realized that I’m not dead yet!

Without thinking, without wasting a thought about the danger of the wolf pack, I put on my jacket and shoes and go outside.

And then I’m really running. Just like that in the dark.

CHAPTER 2

I spend the next day in a strange frenzy, doing all the tasks I didn't have the strength for the previous days. At minus four degrees, I finally climb onto the roof and repair the rotten spot on the north side above the pantry. I fire up the chainsaw and, in the haze of the smell of gasoline, cut the spruce into neat logs. I fetch several buckets of water and manage to wash myself thoroughly at an inside temperature of fifty-one degrees. Then, I patch the hole in my down jacket and the one in the pot holder with the cheesy heart. Afterwards, I go to the pantry with a pad and pen and make a list of my inventory. I'm down to ten cans of Mexican bean stew, an almost full sack of flour, two sacks of rice, five packages of powdered milk, and ten packs of hard cheese sealed in plastic, not counting the more than fifty cans of meats and vegetables, but I'm out of carrots. I note forty pounds of pasta, ten pounds of margarine, and ten boxes of granola still stacked on top of each other on the back shelf. Next to it I find twenty tubes of tomato paste and sixty cans of brown bread. I don't need to worry. If need be, I can make it last through two winters.

Later, when the sun stands like a fireball over the western mountain range, I load the rifle.

I feel exhausted but good for the first time in a long time. All day I've been looking forward to turning on the laptop again in the evening and learning more about the blonde girl. I vowed not to

read all of her previous posts all at once, but to divide them up like a box of chocolates. As if I had to save parts of her life for bad times. Plus, this way I'll have something every day that helps me get through the night.

After the meal, I put batteries in the plastic ceiling light, place it on the wooden table for now and take down the two oil lamps. Just in case I black out again, I lock them in a closet along with anything else that can break. Finally, it's time to boot up the laptop that I placed near the stove an hour earlier so it isn't quite so cold.

I log in to my temporary profile that I created last night. Ben Hoover, not Brendan Connor. No personal information, no profile picture. With a pounding heart, I click on the Louisa bookmark.

She swapped her header. Today, Louisa is standing under an apple tree and laughing with the sunshine. The twinkle in her eyes looks like a rising star in the northern sky.

I take a deep breath. If I have another attack now, it must be her. Then, I should not be looking at her. All day long, this fear of a new attack has bothered me alongside all the anticipation. I just can't figure out what could have triggered the flash. Hopefully not her, just the overexcitement of my rusty nerves.

Without taking my eyes off of her, I pull out a cig and light it. After a while, when nothing happens, my concern eases and I read through the information she shared about herself in the profile.

My friends call me Lou.

I have to smile. It feels strange, like a frown. *Okay, Lou it is*. *I'll call you Lou if you like*.

Age: 16

Luckily not fourteen or fifteen, I would have been scared of myself.

Favorite color: pink, yellow

Hated subject: math

Favorite subjects: sports and art

Hobbies: fashion, music, dancing

Just a real girl. Doesn't like math and loves fashion and dancing. For some reason, I think that's cute although it sounds naive and superficial. My gaze returns to her oval face. To her Alaskan-blue

eyes. They shine so brightly, I shudder again. The hot-cold tingling pours from my stomach into my abdomen. It's disturbing, I can't remember the last time I felt something like this. Have I ever felt something like this before? I look at her again, shaking my head. She looks like there is nothing in her life that could harm her. Nothing she fears. Admirable.

After a while, I tear myself away and scroll down to her first post:

*Hello, everyone, it's me, Lou, soon to be 16 and on Facebook as of today. Finally! The best thing is: I already know that I'm going to love it. It took me three weeks to convince my brother of how harmless things are around here *rolling my eyes in exasperation*!*

*Oh, right, before I forget, send me a friend request if you are looking for friends and be sure to send me a message! Also: Is anyone here good at math? I need help with my homework—probability calculation *gag*!*

One hundred and thirteen comments. Mainly from guys. Lou replied to a few, mostly to those offering to help her with math.

Hey, honey, you look so good I wanna take a bite of you. What are the chances you'd let me taste you once I do your homework for you? Greetings, Matthew.

Excuse me? This ass Matthew Fox looks like he's in his forties. Luckily, Lou ignored him. Although…she liked the comment.

My pulse is pounding hard in my temples and I feel anger boiling up inside of me. I would love to leave a comment about his statement but the post is over a year old. I come across a few more silly pickup lines that Lou didn't like. That's good.

After reading through all the comments, I have to force myself not to look directly at the next entry. I scroll up again. She seems to be very active. The dates of the last posts confirm that she shares something new every day.

I have no idea how many hours have passed or how many cigarettes I've smoked. At some point, I even had to recharge the laptop's battery. By now I have a pretty good idea of who the blonde girl with the blue eyes really is. I took some screenshots of her best photos and saved them in the *Lou* folder. She loves lemon cookies and chocolate donuts. She says she has four brothers. The one called Avery seems to be passionate about cooking. Lou posted pictures of her favorite meals that look like works of art and always wrote below: *Chef Avery recommends today*. Her favorite dish is spaghetti with sundried tomatoes, basil, pine nuts, and garlic.

She even posted a photo of another brother. *Liam*. Lou took the photo as he was doing a headstand in the garden and wrote below, *Liam, the Buddha, Scriver*. *Oops, I hope I haven't locked your soul in my phone now. If so, sorry!* she captioned with a smiley face at the end.

Sometime that night, I force myself to stop reading. I find it a bit scary to be so intensely involved with only one girl, so I click on a few other profiles. But none of the young women speak to me. It's like I'm bewitched. I keep coming back to Lou with her open laugh and shimmering blonde hair that looks like it's reflecting a million rays of sunshine. How would it feel in my hands? How might Lou feel?

When I shut down the laptop, it's two in the morning. The raven in the poplar tree opposite the log cabin is doing its usual squawking concert. It always does that around this time. Usually, it wakes me up from the nightmare where I am pounding my fists against Jordan Price's face over and over again until blood runs down his nose and lips and he begins to stagger. And, like every time, I don't stop. I give him a final hard uppercut to the chin. He doesn't fall—he flies backward through the gloomy battle arena. I hardly notice anything anymore and only when the wild cheers of the spectators die down do I see the unnaturally twisted neck. Someone next to me whispers something and then everything's quiet.

So quiet that even in my dreams I hear the crow's caw like a death knell.

However, today it's not Jordan Price who receives my punches, but Matthew Fox.

I ram my fists into his stomach and shout that I will kill him if he goes near Lou.

Later, just before dawn, I stand at the window and stare out at the lake. The sky is overcast and the few stars don't offer much light. Again, I think of Jordan, the boy who died by my hand. I know it was my fault, even if he broke his neck hitting the stone floor. I should have stopped. He was new at it, a young guy whose eyes flickered uneasily, scared of the fight. When he fell, he was so exhausted with no strength left to deftly catch himself.

That happened about two and a half years ago. The world in which I was living at the time now seems more unreal to me than ever before.

I put my hand on the pane of glass. Tonight is the first night I haven't dreamed about Jordan. I don't know what that means. Is that good or bad? Am I jaded or merely distracted? Am I an even worse person if I eventually start to forget? Is that normal?

I just don't know. I don't even know what it means to be normal.

Feeling lost, I let my eyes wander through the darkness outside. A single snowflake floats to the ground behind the window pane.

What would it be like if I had Lou with me right now?

The next couple of weeks go by, one day just like the other, but with Lou they are not so empty anymore. Everything is easier for me, even getting up in the morning. After breakfast, I do the necessary work. Sometimes I look for trees in the forest that I can cut down for firewood, sometimes I need to repair things or I find that some rodent left a mess on the seat in my outhouse. At lunchtime, I jog several laps around the lake, occasionally build rabbit traps, and in the evenings, I sit in front of my laptop and read Lou's posts.

It's almost like I know her personally now. Sometimes, when my obscure nightmares wake me up at night, I stare out at the lake and imagine what it would be like to have a family of my own. Just like

Lou. Secretly, I envy her ideal world even though I read in an older post that she lost her parents early in life. Maybe I don't envy her world, but rather the ease with which she goes through life. And maybe my envy is also a form of admiration or longing. I can't make sense of my feelings; they are confusing and don't follow logic. Still, it's better than before. I feel something again and I have Lou to thank for that, the girl with the flaxen hair and Alaskan eyes.

In early March, the snow begins to melt, releasing a few boulders on shore. Next to the log cabin, the first green of the crocuses bursts forth and every day the pale winter sun gets brighter. The air gets so warm during the day that a layer of fog gathers over the lake in the morning hours. Sometimes, the Chinook blows through, parting the mist like a sea, leaving trails that soon disappear into nothingness. It looks mystical, like the heart of Avalon. I think Lou would like it.

As I walk to the water hole, this morning's fog has already lifted and I spot a few hooded campers in front of a campfire on the other side of Quiet Lake. I stop dead in my tracks like a caribou sensing danger. Just as attentively, I register all the other changes. I make out the outline of an orange canvas tent behind the group and then notice their supply bag dangling from the low branch of a willow tree.

Their presence makes me nervous, I don't know why. I'd like to get my rifle and fire a warning shot to make them leave, but that would only get me into trouble. The shore across Quiet Lake is not part of the land I've leased.

I scoop the water out of the hole, ignoring their calls that suddenly echo across the ice. Unmistakably another language, though they switch to English: "*Hello! Hello, my friend!*"

I don't even look in their direction anymore. I don't want any contact with them, no small talk for hermits. I've only just managed to get along with myself. With me and Lou. And that works fine. I don't need anyone else.

I pull the hat almost over my eyes and carry the buckets back to the cabin. With every passing hour of this early March day, I become

more aware that my days in the cabin are over. Spring is just around the corner and it'll not only bring back sparrows and redpolls, but apparently also tourists. The lake is a place of solitude only in winter.

As I sit on the couch tonight and boot up my laptop, I feel a strange sense of nostalgia. Feeling as if I am being driven out of paradise, I decide I must return to the RV. Somehow, it's all connected now. Lou, the winter, the cabin, and me.

Her latest picture makes me smile—it still feels alien on my cheeks, like sore muscles. Why on earth is she photographing her feet in those Chucks? Ah, yes…the Chucks are new. Of course, she has to post about them! And of course they are yellow. I would have bet my entire inventory on that—okay, okay, maybe only half and the other half on pink!

Instinctively, I run my hands through my hair, wondering for the first time if she would like me. Does she like dark hair and dark eyes? I turn my head and peer at my reflection in the window glass. A serious face with prominent cheekbones and a wide mouth with thin lips.

I've never been interested in my appearance, but there were plenty of women in the fighting scene who threw themselves at me. It wasn't because of my character, at most because of my victories. Ramon, the boy I survived the first winter in the slums with, always used to say that I should make my money with my face instead of my fists. That I looked like a runway model. I didn't believe him. And even if that were the case, after these months in the wilderness, there's nothing left of it. My gaze is unsteady, almost furtive, my hair too long, and my hollow cheeks covered in stubble.

I look like the freak I am.

Disgusted with myself, I turn back to the laptop, happy Lou can't see me.

I scroll around a bit and, to my delight, discover another post I haven't seen yet.

Hello to all of you out there. Here in Ash Springs, the asphalt is melting again in the sun and I'm just hanging around, and don't

know what to do. Don't you sometimes feel like your life is just like the monotonous road that leads from Ash Springs to Rachel? With nothing but heat-eaten bushes and dry sand? Don't you also long for something to finally happen? Something that grabs you like an eagle and yanks you so high in the air, you can see the whole world from above? Something that makes you fly so high that the sun's rays illuminate your heart? Something that turns you inside out and leaves you as someone you don't recognize? Don't you long for it, too?

I read this entry over and over again. It's the first in which Lou reveals something truly personal about herself. Something that has nothing to do with fashion, girlfriends, family, or school. Somehow, I feel like these words were meant only for me. As if Lou had peered into my heart and found a longing there that I had hidden from myself. Part of me grasps something while the rest lags behind. Maybe it's only a hunch in my subconscious, I don't know.

"Something that makes you fly so high that the sun's rays illuminate your heart," I repeat in a whisper. Illuminate the darkness forever. A river of sadness and happiness rushes through me and all that's left is a deep, burning longing for more.

I stare at her and tap my index finger gently against her lips. "Alaska girl, what are you doing to me?"

CHAPTER 3

My move from the cabin to the RV takes several weeks. I had somewhat forgotten how damn long the path through the dense coniferous forests is. A one-way trip with luggage takes over seven hours. Since I don't want to leave all my leftover canned food behind, I carry half of it to my summer camp: a clearing by a waterfall in the middle of a forest full of spruce, fir, birch, and aspens.

My last hike from the cabin to the RV is in early May.

Lou continues to be my first thought in the morning and the last one at night.

Sometimes I dream about her instead of Jordan, but when I want to touch her, I can never reach her. It's always like looking at her on a screen. In the videos which she has been so generously posting on Facebook for some time now, her voice is exactly how I imagined it. Clear and bright, reminding me of the blue in bluebells, the sky, the vastness, and maybe flying. When I first heard it, I thought I was going to have a blackout. Sometimes, I think Lou comes across like an overdose of life.

After lighting this evening's campfire, I sit down in front of it with my laptop on my lap and watch my favorite video first. A friend of Lou's took it in the Scrivers' parched yard. The camera shot is unsteady,

but it doesn't matter. Lou wears shorts with a crocheted lace hem and a light-colored ruffled top that hangs over the shorts. It almost looks like she's wearing a white dress. In the golden evening light, she turns absent-mindedly on the lawn, barefoot, arms outstretched, hair like a sparkling tide lapping around her shoulders. And every time she looks into the camera, my heart aches because surrounded by light, the girl's laughter and the fluttering of the ruffles make her seem like a creature from another reality—intangible, merely a dream.

There are days when I can watch this video 20 times in a row, today, however, a new post distracts me. I've been waiting all day for it because it's not usual for Lou to go so long without leaving an update. Full of anticipation, I switch to her entry.

Hello to all of you out there! Unfortunately, today I have to tell you that I am leaving Facebook for a while.

It takes me a few seconds to truly grasp the meaning of her statement. My pulse starts pounding in my temples as I read the sentence over and over again. I automatically clench my hands and only realize it when I squeeze so hard, my knuckles crack.

What does Lou mean by *for a while*? Three days? One week? A year? That can't be—she was so happy on Facebook! Suddenly, a second pop-up window opens at the bottom of the screen and alerts another post from her.

Thank God, this must have been a stupid joke!

I greedily absorb the next few words, and as I read, nausea rises in my throat.

For anyone who's interested in my summer break—here's our itinerary:

6/25–7/1: Sequoia National Park, Lodgepole

7/2–7/8: Yosemite National Park, Tuolumne Meadows
7/9–7/11: Mammoth Lakes, New Shady Rest
7/12–7/15: Death Valley National Park, we don't know yet where exactly!
7/16 > Ash Springs

I'm sorry, don't forget me!

The letters dance drunkenly before my eyes. "A while" apparently means a long time. Way too long! It's only the beginning of May now! Judging by the route, she won't be back on Facebook until August at the earliest. But why is she signing off? Does she have a boyfriend who won't let her be on the platform? She never mentioned a guy, I paid special attention to that—it was always about her brothers, her girlfriends, her everyday life. I would have noticed if she had suddenly met someone, I'm sure of it.

Does it have anything to do with the club that she so desperately wanted to join? The Hades-in-Love? They must be in dire need of it if they named themselves after the Greek god of the underworld.

Maybe it's just a bad joke and Lou will soon post: *Hah, did you fall for it?*

That would be like her! Yes, of course, that has to be it.

I stare at the screen and wait. It feels like December and I am waiting for the ice to crack. What if it wasn't a joke? What if she's gone forever from my life? So what? More trance-like than mindful, I take a screenshot of her last post and save it in the Lou folder. She can't just disappear like that! She shouldn't just disappear like that. What am I supposed to do in the wilderness without her? What reason would I have to get up in the morning and breathe?

I wipe the sweat from my face with trembling hands. Something inside me grows out of control, but before I can smash the laptop to the floor in anger, I refresh the page again.

Please, just let it be a joke!

The connection takes forever to reload the page, and when it finally does, it just says:

404 Not found

*Suddenly, m*y head is blank. Everything is gone. I reload again.

404 Not found.

She's actually gone! An ominous flicker surrounds me—dark, evil flames eat through my body straight to my soul. Stunned, I set the laptop next to me, get up, and walk in circles around the campfire. Once, twice, three times… Lou cannot have left me. She *shouldn't* have left me!

A thunderstorm of desperation and anger builds inside me as I blindly wander around. At some point, I thrash the nearest tree trunk like a madman. The splintering bark hits my eye and a sudden pain shoots up my hands through my forearms and into my shoulders.

I'd love to drag Lou out of the computer and ask why she's doing this to me! I scream words into the night that I don't understand. A sort of mishmash of bitter pleading and raging anger. I want to go back to the computer and smash it to pieces to get Lou out of there, but all I do is pound the trunk in front of me. I only stop when my hands are numb and knuckles bloodied.

As if standing next to me, uninvolved, I watch myself stagger around the forest disoriented. The color of the fire and the stars fades and forest and darkness rush toward me, swallowing me alive. I fall…

Light! Bright and dazzling like a thousand suns. The boy squeezes his eyes shut so tight it hurts. Hands grab his collar and pull him into a sitting position.

"There, you little shit. Drink up, and get a move on!"

He feels the cup the monster puts in his fingers and attempts to bring it to his mouth like usual, but his hands won't obey. The vessel slips away from him and an icy liquid spills over his thin shirt. Before he can flinch from the cold, a hard blow hits his neck. His torso is thrown forward, pain exploding in scarlet sparks behind his closed lids.

"You damn bastard, too stupid to even drink!"

Hands push him back into the confinement. He blinks, wanting to take a fragment of the light with him into the darkness.

One, two, three, four… I'm not really here anymore. The lid closes for the umpteenth time. He thinks he can't bear it any longer. The narrowness, the cold, the darkness. The feeling of disintegrating, of being dead.

"Are you crying, you little piece of filth?" Through the narrow gap, he glimpses the stony face and gray eyes. Lifeless but dangerous like a blood-sniffing shark.

"No, sir." His voice trembles. He tenses every muscle and breathes shallowly, trying not to make any suspicious noise. Not a peep. Nothing.

The light grows brighter. The fist slams into his face without warning, accompanied by harsh curses. One, two, three, four… He stops counting, feeling the pain everywhere. His jaw, his nose, his back that bangs against the wood bottom from the force of the blows. Something wet runs down his lips and cheeks. He prays it's not tears.

"You're not crying?"

"No…sir." Words. He doesn't know who's saying them. Everything hurts.

"Capital of Afghanistan?"

"Ka-Kabul." The wetness on his cheeks keeps running.

"Ethiopia?"

Out of a dense fog he hears a soft moan. "Addis Ababa."

"Bulgaria?"

"Sofia."

"Brunei?"

"Bandar Seri Begawan." He feels dizzy.

"United States in alphabetical order?"

He lists them, functioning like a clock that has been wound up. He falters after Pennsylvania and remembers why the man is punishing him this time. He has stalled in the same spot before. But even now he can't remember what comes after Pennsylvania.

The next punch to his face takes his breath away.

"Don't think you'll get off that easily. You think I enjoy homeschooling a stinky bastard like you? Don't you think I have better things to do?"

The boy tries to suck in air but gets none. He swallows convulsively against his narrow throat, trying to hold back the tears and the begging. Neither of which helps. Nothing helps. Only, maybe dying.

When I come to after the flashback, I'm curled up on the ground. Something crawls across my face and I mechanically wipe the spot on my chin where I feel the tingling. This time, I know immediately why I freaked out.

Lou left me!

Instantly, the anger is back, yet underneath I sense something far worse. An infinite void. Just like out on Quiet Lake as if I were looking into a nothingness that has neither a beginning nor an end.

Groaning, I try to hoist myself to my feet but my limbs seem frozen stiff from the cold. I fall forward and land on all fours. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the burnt logs from the campfire.

Disoriented, I peer up at the sky. The few clouds glow a pale red, but it can't possibly be morning already. This would mean that my flash had lasted over seven hours.

With another groan, I sit down on the forest floor and absentmindedly reach for the silver coin on my leather bracelet, encircling it with cold fingers.

Don't let that happen again. Don't let me be left alone again. Even though there's no monster left to fear, I'm afraid. Of every day that I live. Of death that I'm too much of a coward for. Of the dark. Of people. Of loneliness. Of myself. Of never again being able to watch Lou do her sun dance, spinning and laughing dreamily…

The rush of adrenaline triggered by that last thought makes me jump. I tumble madly toward the laptop that's lying on the floor, swipe a few bugs off the vent with the back of my hand, and hammer on the enter key repeatedly because it's taking too long.

After what feels like an eternity, I can finally click the bookmark and the page reloads.

404 Not found.

I slam my palm against the keyboard, screaming in anger, but then I reflect for a moment and open *Lou's* folder. I nervously click on one picture after the other and stare at them with a beating heart.

Lou in skimpy shorts with a cute pout in front of an H&M; Lou rollerblading with blowing hair, in a pink blouse with a blue-and-green cake pop; Lou in the bathroom in front of the mirror taking a funny selfie wrinkling her nose. Lou in starry flip-flops by the lettuce bed with Avery, the brother who looks most like her. Lou's spaghetti with tomatoes and pine nuts… I've gone through them much too fast.

If only I had saved more pictures and not stopped one day. Then I would have something to live on. Live on until when? Maybe she'll never sign in again. Or did she simply disable the account?

I stare at the images again: Lou's oval face, her sweet full lips, her deep blue, round eyes that can banish the darkness around me.

From one second to the next, my veins start to burn, hot and wild. My heart is pounding against my ribs as if I felled ten fir trees. It scares me. Over and over, I try to fight something I feel absolutely powerless against. A burning, irrepressible longing, a tearing tug in my chest. I feel like I can't go even another day without Lou. Somewhere in the back of my mind, images of her here with me appear: Lou, petite and blonde against the dark pine trees; Lou at the waterfall, laughing and splashing water around her; Lou by the campfire with bright eyes; Lou wrapped in a blanket with me in the RV; Lou coming close, so close I can wrap my hands around her tiny waist… My heart runs away with me, into the fantasies I wish I could keep at bay, but they just keep becoming more tangible, more real. My brain is full of Lou!

And as if out of nowhere, suddenly there are her words: *Don't you also dream that something will finally happen?*

Something is happening to me. It's those pictures of her in the wild. Suddenly, everything becomes clear to me:

I need Lou here with me. From one second to the next, I know this with absolute certainty: I need Lou. I don't want to live without Lou anymore. Only with her does everything make sense. I have to bring her here, to the Yukon, so I can look at her every day. Being able to look at her will make everything alright. She doesn't have to love me, I just need to have her near me. Only then will I be fine again. Only with her can I keep the darkness at bay.

I click on the picture of her looking at the camera almost defiantly, lips pursed. Heat prickles my skin.

Do you want to, Lou? Do you want to come to the Yukon? To me?

Her defiant gaze challenges me.

Could I do this? Could I bring her here?

A surge of pure adrenaline rushes through me at the notion. For seconds, my mind is swept empty and I am carried to a place that seems sweet and enticing. Lou and I here together! Lou in my arms…

A crash in the undergrowth pulls me out of my reverie. In the thicket, I discover a roebuck working on an aspen branch with its antlers in order to get to the young shoots.

Instantly, I feel like I've woken up sober after a binge. What was I thinking? How did I come up with such an absurd idea? Bring Lou here—that's insane!

And yet… Involuntarily, I get up and pace in front of the RV. Would it really be that crazy to bring Lou to the Yukon?

It would not only be insane, it would be utterly insane! No way. But I have to see her! Every day if possible. That has never been clearer to me than now. Only if she is a part of my life will I be happy.

I could go to Ash Springs. The thought is suddenly there. I could park the RV near her home and secretly take new pictures of her via a telephoto lens.

Of course, you could just as well lie down in the Scrivers' yard with a telephoto lens—it wouldn't be any more conspicuous! The giant RV would be as unobtrusive in that small town as a tarantula would be in Avery's tomato-basil spaghetti!

I could buy a car and park the RV outside of Ash Springs.

And what will you do if you get blackouts and break something or hurt someone? Then some longtime, incorruptible local resident calls the police and you'll be behind bars before you can whisper "Louisa Scriver!" And then you'll never see her again.

Dammit!

Like after a fight, I suck the dried blood from my split knuckles. If I can't get to Lou in Ash Springs, how else am I going to see her again?

I could buy a house in Ash Springs, but that wouldn't solve my flashback problem. Even if I'm not lying in wait with a camera, after a few weeks, my strange behavior and blackouts would be noticed. The reason I fled to the Yukon! Plus, would I really want to see in person how Lou takes her boyfriend home one day?

You could be the one she takes home.

Because she really wants you, too. Especially someone like you!

Something in my chest tightens. No, I can't be loved, I can't even be liked. I clench my hands in sheer desperation. I can't find a way to get closer to Lou. Unless, of course…yes, unless I actually bring her to the Yukon.

But she would never willingly come here with me. She already hates Ash Springs, how boring would the wilderness seem to her? Besides, I can't just take her against her will, can I?

Yes, of course you can, a voice deep inside me whispers. The thought of having her with me showers me with a sweet stream of happiness and trepidation.

But kidnaping Lou against her will would mean consciously luring her away from her brothers and her home. Can I really do this?

I listen to my intuition. My conscience suddenly falls silent. Reason is silent. Instead, the images come back: Lou turning and laughing in the light of the campfire. Dancing flames breaking on her face like liquid gold. My heart starts beating like it did weeks ago when I first saw her. Is this fear or joy?

Taking a deep breath, I sit in front of the laptop again. *Everything will be fine, calm down! 404 Not found has no power over you. I'll just take Lou with me*.

But can I really keep her here against her will? And how do I get her into the RV voluntarily? How am I supposed to do that? Instinctively, I bite my torn knuckle, tasting the metallic note of the blood. I want to see her laugh! She shouldn't suffer. However, she will hardly be convinced of my plan with words.

Hey, Lou, get in, we're going to the Yukon!

Really, now? For how long?

Well, forever of course. Do you want to?

No, words will not suffice. But what other options do I have?

As hard as I think about it, I just can't come up with anything. I definitely don't want to hurt her, yet it may be necessary to achieve my goal. It's a compromise I'll have to make.

I close my eyes and see Lou in front of me. She smiles at me. A pleasant shiver runs down my spine and fireworks of longing, desire, and wild excitement explode in my stomach. I stare again at the photo in which she looks so wildly alluring. I tap my fingertips gently against Lou's face, feeling that tightness in my chest again and the heat blisters on my skin. "You'll be mine soon, little sun girl. Forever and ever you'll belong to me."

The day goes by without me noticing. It's like after a particularly tough fight, everything seems quieter as if the volume had been turned down. I'm swimming in a rush of sweet, pure adrenaline.

Not once do I question my decision. Something inside me has snapped like a bolt that was pushed and is now stuck.

I'll get Lou. This decision comes as a bit of a shock, still, the feeling of being in a daze, the delirium, the thought of doing the right thing for me prevails.

Suddenly, I have so much to do, I feel like I'm on speed. I make lists and jot down everything I know about Lou. She likes citrus blossom body wash, melon gum, and lemon cookies from Cypress. Chocolate donuts, spaghetti, pine nuts, and sundried tomatoes. I go through the pictures in my folder and note down what she's wearing in them and, if she posted it, the brand. In the snapshot of her in

the bathroom, I spot soap: *Wild Ocean Dream*. It, too, goes on my list.

I want Lou just like she's in the pictures and videos that made me so happy for such a long time. She should look, smell, laugh, and dance exactly as I imagine. Also, she will feel more comfortable if things around her are identical to home. Maybe then she won't hate me so much. I quickly push that last thought aside. I don't want to think about everything that immediately follows. There are feelings inside me I don't want to feel, truths I don't want to face. And yet they are anchored in me, deep in my soul, uncannily like the echo of a sonar in the valleys of the sea. Getting rid of them is impossible.

Maybe Lou will even fall in love with me.

Monster!

The pen breaks under the pressure of my fingers. There's something sick and perverse about the idea, even I know that. But the boy from before knows better than that. He was so lonely that he was even willing to love the monster that tormented him.

I don't want to be a monster; I just want Lou to be with me. That's all.

The next morning, I leave the place that has been my home in the summer for the past three years. For the first time in a long time, I have a goal besides getting through the day as quickly as possible. I'm driving back to L.A., the city I grew up in.

Last night, I searched the web for Lou a few more times, but the result was always the same: *404 Not found*. Below it a list of all possible Louisas, but no Louisa Scriver. Regardless, even if I had found her again, my plan is made. It seems unalterable to me, just like a strong earthquake near the coast is bound to trigger a tsunami. I've decided to take Lou from one of the campgrounds she posted on Facebook. My mobile home won't attract unwanted attention there. Besides, there is a lot of buzzing activity on the campsites with lots of tourists coming and going. If I'm lucky, I can blend into the crowd and remain pretty much invisible. I haven't

figured out yet exactly how to lure her into my RV, but there's still plenty of time for that. First, I need to stock up on supplies, get clothes, and make all the necessary arrangements. I also need things for Lou that I can't easily buy in a store. For the first time in years, I'm happy about my old contacts even if it takes an effort to go back. I'm definitely going to have flashes, but I'm ready to go through all of them. If necessary, I'll chain myself up so I don't hurt anyone. I have to take this risk for Lou.

As I drive down the lonely, deserted roads of the Yukon, I roll down the window and feel the wind whipping through my hair. I turn on the radio and listen to music. When was the last time I sang along to a song? Has it been a year or two? When was the last time I listened to music? I can't recall, but it doesn't matter, not anymore.

After a while, I stretch my arm out the window and begin to enjoy this new state. I feel free even if I don't know exactly from what. It's a bit as if I had died a long time ago and now I've risen again.

CHAPTER 4

Los Angeles feels like I'm stranded in a science fiction city. It's harder than I imagined. Colorful houses, palm trees, and cars pass me in a blur, leaving behind nothing more than a jumble of colors. And there are people everywhere. The whole city is full of them. Suddenly, my project seems impossible.

I pull up at a gas station on Sunrise Avenue and grip the steering wheel with both hands. I'm freezing cold but sweat is running down my face.

I can't do this. I just can't do it. Too many colors, too much noise, too many people.

I take a deep breath through my nose, reach for the cell phone on the passenger seat, and look at an old screenshot of Lou. She winks at me and I immediately feel the warmth flow back into me.

Come on, Bren, she seems to be saying. It's really easy.

Is it, sun girl?

She is beaming. *Of course!*

Of course! A smile flashes through my mind as I start the engine. Everything's kind of easy for you, isn't it?

I drive on with sweaty hands and only calm down again when I come to a familiar area.

I'm home, I think mockingly.

I park the RV in a secure parking lot on the Los Angeles River and walk the stretch toward Compton. The rows of flat-roofed

houses are only a few miles from Hollywood Boulevard. Even from here, I can still make out the skyscrapers downtown: a gleaming silhouette of black and silver. Huge, yet tiny compared to the gigantic mountain peaks of the Yukon.

I walk along the concrete Los Angeles River where artists have left their colorful graffiti and come to the abandoned railroad tracks. That's where, at the age of twelve, I passed the initiation for one of the most notorious gangs: two minutes of gang beating and a round of waterboarding. After that I was one of the Bones, one of many youths in the ghetto who had fallen through the social cracks. Except I wasn't African American, Latino, or Chicano. Luckily, that didn't matter to the Bones. The gang slogan became my personal religion: *Fight or die*. After fleeing my stepfather, I wanted one thing above all: never to feel weak again. Life in the slums is hard. If you can't fight, you will eventually become a victim again—of the state, of rival gangs, or of starvation.

I jump the rails and pull the hood of my sweater down over my face. Nobody should immediately recognize me. A lot of time has passed. I have no idea which gang is in charge here at the moment, who has beef with whom, and whose territory borders whose. Also, Jordan Price's brothers may still be searching for me. A week after the fight, they put a bounty on my head for whoever would bring me to them alive. In our circles, nobody owes anyone anything. And I haven't paid up yet.

Warily, I look around, but it's quiet. Only two African Americans with black scarves walk by me. Black Bloods. Both no more than twelve, still too young to be dangerous to me.

After a few blocks, I come to the border between Compton and Lynwood. Strange feelings of alienation, self-loathing, and old fears well up inside me, familiar companions with a common cause. I had vowed never to come back here, but when Ramon asked me where I wanted to meet him, I told him Thorson Ave. without thinking. The street where I was trapped until I was twelve and where I saw little more than the dusty stretch in front of the front door.

I slow down the last few feet, the hot Santa Ana wind on my face. This stretch of Thorson Ave. is unpaved and my feet whirl a

mixture of ocher sand and dirt through the air. I remember kicking up the pebbles when I escaped.

Why did I choose this particular place, this street, as a meeting place?

I look around with a strange feeling in my stomach. The shabby residential area looks deserted as if the residents had left years ago. For a long time, this might have even been the case for the last house on the left. According to Ramon, my stepfather disappeared a year after my escape.

My heart starts beating faster. The house seems different than I remember. The bulky lattice fence surrounding the property is gone, leaving only a low brick wall and a waist-high gate. I stop directly in front of it and let my eyes wander carefully over the building.

The crumbling gray stucco has given way to a white façade and two royal palms have replaced the overgrown undergrowth in the front yard. Curtains with turquoise squiggles hang in the windows to the left of the door and a blue curtain with fire engines billows in the wind in the one on the right. A teddy bear mobile dangles directly from the glass.

A strange sight—the house looks like a foreign body in this area.

Had I truly been trapped behind those walls for so long? Chained to the concrete walls of the closet, not seen by anyone else on earth? Why didn't the neighbors notice what was happening behind those walls over the years? Didn't they care? Did they even know I existed?

I circle the property. The yard is still surrounded by the same bushes, but through a bare spot, I discover the rotten staircase that leads from the outside area to the basement. The tiny elderberry bush on the corner has grown as tall as a tree and next to it the privet blooms, in front of which Blacky lies buried.

A shivering chill runs through my arms despite the warm temperature. The smell of fresh wood and varnish fills my nose. And I smell him. His sour sweat, the cheap aftershave, and the whiskey.

No. I shake my head vigorously. *My name is Brendan, I'm not a child who can't defend himself anymore. I'm twenty-two. The little boy from back then doesn't exist anymore*.

The smell fades, sinking to the spot in my mind that doesn't age. This place holds too many memories. Too many—and yet too few. Back then, it had seemed to me as if time stretched out endlessly. After my escape, I suddenly had the feeling that I had hardly lived. During my imprisonment, there were too many identical days, always the same feelings. Too much fear. too much loneliness. Infinite loneliness. And even boredom. I toiled in his workshop until I dropped, and naturally, I didn't have any friends. My playmates were the school books he gave me, that's all I owned. Two gray pants, two gray shirts, always alternating every three weeks—much too cold in the winter. The silver coin I had hidden in a crack in the floorboards was the only thing that belonged to me. I remember the hours I did skill exercises with it, finger exercises, heads-or-tails games. I stared at the bird and the treetops on it for several months until I could have drawn it by heart. But I had neither paper nor pens in the windowless room, I only got them for my assignments.

"Bren?"

The voice pulls me out of my thoughts. I turn and spot Ramon less than ten feet away.

"Shit, it really is you!" he exclaims and takes a step back. "I can't believe…" He stops and narrows his eyes at me.

"Ramon." I don't know what people say when they meet again for the first time in years. I can't even tell if I missed him. I just stand there for a moment and stare at him. He still wears his short, dark dreadlocks, which protrude from his head like a halo, looking like a cross between a punk rocker and Jesus Christ. Somehow, the sight of him calms me, I can't say why. I force myself to nod to him. "Nice to see you again." I guess that works.

"Such a polite Slumdog Prince. Brendan, he who knows the Latin name for every bone he breaks…" Ramon grins, but then becomes serious again. "Dammit, Bren…" His fingers tremble as he strokes his spiked dreadlocks. "What are you doing here? If you came for the cash…"

"You don't owe me anything," I say quickly. *But I owe you so much*. Only now do I realize how thin he's gotten. His crystal-blue eyes are bloodshot and it's not only his fingers that are shaking. But

I won't ask him what happened to him like he never asked what happened to me. A rule of decency in a life devoid of morals.

He looks at me suspiciously. A look that doesn't match his soft features, never has. "No one here gives up their cash."

"I have plenty of money, remember?" I take a step toward him and he immediately backs away.

"You burned through it in three years and now came to collect debts? Damn, where have you been anyway? At first, I thought Price's brothers…but word would have gotten around…"

"I'm not coming back. I just want you to get me a few things."

"You're not coming for the fucking cash and you aren't coming to settle things with Price once and for all?"

"No." I shake my head. "There is nothing to settle. But I need… I need things that you can get easier than I can right now."

"And then my debt is paid?" Ramon raises his eyebrows.

I could scream. I hate this fuss about debt and payment. As if that would make anything better. How much would my stepfather have to pay to redeem his debt to me? First, what would he have to pay me with? Money, blood, or life? Some debts can never be repaid. Like with me and Jordan. And even if his brothers killed me, the guilt would be just another passenger in my grave on the way to hell.

"You don't owe me anything," I blurt out impatiently. "I already told you then." I want to shake him. "You needed money, I gave it to you. Consider it a gift."

Ramon smiles timidly and his tense posture relaxes. "What do you need?"

I dig out the list from my pocket that I wrote on the way and hand it to him. "It's all on there."

He frantically unfolds the paper and wipes his dripping nose with his forearm. He looks sick, sicker than a mere cold. "Chloroform, knockout drops, atropine…sleeping pills. Dimenhydrinate? Knockout gas?" Somewhere in the distance, a dog barks. "I don't want to know what for, do I?"

"No, you don't." I point to the paper. "I need the stuff undiluted; it has to be absolutely pure. I don't want any messed-up shit, okay?"

Ramon nods. “Chloro and the gas…that’s gonna take a while. I can get the other stuff pretty easily.”

“How long do you think until you have the chloro?”

Ramon shrugs. “A week or two, maybe three.”

“That’s alright. If you make it sooner, I’ll pay you an additional thousand dollars.” I’m in no hurry. It’s still a while until June 25th, but I think he needs money. I want him to have it, that way he won’t bug me for more. He’s done so much for me, he deserves it. Lost in thought, I look at the renovated house and imagine how he had smashed the window with bandaged fists to get in. The monster had been out shopping. A couple of Bones had stood guard while he was searching for old documents of mine in the apartment.

“Are you on crystal or what?” I hear him asking.

I mentally tear myself away and turn around again. “Because of the narcotics?”

“Because of the narcotics, because of the narcotics,” he mimics in an affected manner, then his voice drops. “Fucking shit, I’m not talking about your drug list. Have you looked in the mirror recently?”

I know what I look like: hollow cheeks, furtive gaze and stunted facial expressions. “I’ve been alone for a long time,” is all I say.

Yes, I have been alone for a long time, but that is going to change. Everything is going to change with Lou and that’s the only reason I’m here. Have come back, as Ramon says. For a moment, I think of her silky blonde hair sparkling in the evening light and I immediately feel better. Like a thousand tons fell off my shoulders, like none of this meant anything. It’s merely a tiny step I have to take to reach my goal.

“Where have you been, Bren?”

“Far away.”

“Where?”

“Better you don’t know.”

“And why are we meeting on this very street, in front of this house? Bren, are you listening to me?”

Yes, why here? I didn’t have a flashback, it’s a miracle. Did I want to prove to myself that I could face my past without a flash? But then I realize I will never be able to control these seizures.

Situations that seem harmless catapult me back, while moments when I do expect them, nothing happens. But I knew that anyway, didn't I? So why am I really here?

The monster is gone, long gone. I'll never find another way to take revenge for all those years.

I walk toward the house step by step, feeling the warm wind on my face like tender fingers caressing it. I will trap Lou the way I was trapped behind these walls.

I was too young to remember anything else. During my life, there were only these walls as if they were the center of the world. His world.

For years, I wondered what was out there; how the air smelled in the streets, how the sun felt on your skin, or how a laugh sounded.

But I will treat Lou differently than he treated me. I'm not putting her in a windowless closet. She will live under the blue skies of the Yukon, in green, expansive pine forests. She can dress however and eat whatever she wants. She can feel what she wants. I want her to be happy with me, I definitely don't mean to harm her. I merely want her to be with me and one day she will understand why I abducted her.

I look at the back of my hand, at the pale scar left from my failed attempt to escape my handcuffs.

I know it will take a long time for Lou to realize that the Yukon is her bliss. And the wilderness is a dangerous place. Sometimes more dangerous than L.A.

"I'll also need double-lock handcuffs," I say out loud, mentally scanning the interior of the RV. "Eight pairs, no, better ten. All made of hardened steel. And iron chains. Also ten."

I hear Ramon's footsteps behind me. He stands next to me and clears his throat awkwardly. "Iron chains?"

I close my eyes briefly, feel the hard pull of the unyielding bonds on my arms and shoulder blades. During the drive, I thought I might chain myself up during a blackout. That seems to be the best solution to not endanger Lou, either. So the chains will be for both of us. "They can't be from the hardware store, most of them are too heavy." They shouldn't hurt Lou unnecessarily. "Is Dexter still alive?"

Ramon nods.

"Get some of his and I'll try them." I have no idea what Ramon is thinking and I don't care. Luckily, he's someone who doesn't ask questions.

Again, I stare at the walls, which now glow as white as the pompous mansions of Beverly Hills. The curtain with the fire engines billows in the wind behind the tilted window, the teddy bears on the mobile bobbing up and down as if they were rocking. A child's laughter penetrates my ears. Definitely a boy.

Perhaps he has the perfect family. Mother, father, child.

Something about this image makes my heart heavy as lead. It pulls me down, down into the depths of the basement, into the dark, somewhere I don't want to be, never again. I don't want to feel this. Not this weight of millions and millions of tons. A sharp pain explodes behind my forehead, becoming a crimson fog that seeps into every cell of my body.

For seconds, I feel like I'm getting lost in a haze as if my thinking is being flooded by another consciousness. Images of Lou float past me. Handcuffed Lou, held captive by an iron chain on the wall of the RV. She pulls and tugs at the bonds but cannot free herself. And the longer and harder she tries, the more desperately she cries. I try to put myself in her shoes, but there's a wall. I feel nothing. No pity, no regrets. Just satisfaction that she'll be mine. I have the right to abduct her. It will never be as empty and cold as it used to be. Never. I'll make sure she'll never leave me. And if that means that her initial time with me is going to be in chains, then so be it.

"Bren?"

The red fog inside me disappears like someone pulled a plug. I watch the rocking teddies. What was I thinking about just now?

Mother, father, child. Lou in chains. Why was I so indifferent? Why didn't I feel anything?

I mechanically shake my head. I do not want to do that. But it will be necessary. A part of me knows. A part of me can do it. No regrets, no pangs of conscience. Maybe the part that never left the basement of this house.

Everything's kind of easy for you, isn't it?

Of course!
She'll get over it, Bren, for sure. She wants an adventure.
My heart is no longer heavy and that's a good thing.

Once Ramon leaves, I return to the RV and search for a parking space in front of a Walmart where I can park for free. First, I close all the curtains, then I sit down on the two-man bench, a pen and a blank sheet of paper on the table in front of me. For a moment, I do nothing, just let my thoughts and images flow. I can't get the renovated house out of my head. It seemed so different, suddenly everything seems somehow wrong. *He* shouldn't be gone. *He* should be locked in that house forever!

With a sigh, I pull my phone out of my pocket and look at Lou's screenshot. Nothing seems wrong with her, on the contrary. All is good.

When I feel better, I pull out my grocery list from last year and make a new one. I calculate how many canned goods remain from my winter storage, double everything else, and add another winter ration for good measure. So the supplies will definitely last until Lou is out of the woods. I really don't want to go back to civilization before then. Lou is supposed to adjust to life in the wilderness. Obviously, it would be best if we never had to go to another place and live on what the forest has to offer.

I feel myself becoming more and more relaxed as I follow my train of thoughts.

I spend the next few days exclusively in the RV so I don't have to go out among people. Every other day, I change parking lots so that nobody notices the mobile home. Once, I even drive past a dump station. With a tingle of anticipation in my stomach, I jot down many more things I hadn't yet thought of: fake license plates for the RV, double rations of medication, pads, tampons, and all that girly stuff I have no clue about. And of course lots of extras of the stuff Lou likes: lemon cookies, chocolate donuts, pancakes, waffles, lots of sugar for coffee, pine nuts, pasta, sundried tomatoes, and pickled garlic.

After a week, I purchase the materials I need to attach the chains on an early morning in a hardware store that is not busy yet: metal plates, screws, eyelets. I've seen it all for so many years that I don't need to make a list for them. For the assembly, I drive to a parking lot in a large commercial port where nobody will notice the noise. I distribute the mounts fairly evenly, only adding more in the sleeping area. Sleeping in chains can be torture, especially if the chains are always in the same place—and especially at night, I will not be able to do without imprisonment for a long time. For the day, I bought some cable ties and bells from the hardware store to make bracelets out of them, a kind of signal so that she can't escape unnoticed. Finally, I exchange the mirror in the bathroom for a shatterproof version—to be on the safe side.

Once I'm done with my tasks, I have no choice but to wait for Ramon and research chains. Only when I have decided on a model do I start shopping.

In order not to attract attention, I visit malls and supermarkets all over L.A. one by one. Three times, I black out, twice I make it back to the RV just in time to chain myself in the sleeping area. I'm less fortunate at Trader Joe's. The flash catches me as someone smelling of varnish and wood oil walks by. I don't know exactly what I did, but when I come to, the organic apples are spread out on the floor and a shelf has toppled over. The only way to appease the owner is to pay him more money than he's probably made in the last two months. At least I didn't hurt anyone.

Two weeks after the seizure, I drive to an abandoned auto repair shop near the commercial port. The whole street is a collection of bankrupt businesses, not even hooligans come here to vandalize. The perfect place. With a dark, eerie feeling in my gut, I stare at the workshop I scouted out last week. The door to the former reception room is hanging partially off its hinges and all the windows are shattered. Desolate, like the lead-gray sky and the cold wind blowing inland from the Pacific today.

This is going to be the hardest part of my plan.

With a deep sigh, I get out and carry the large wooden planks into the former inspection room one after the other. Then I get the rest of the lumber, the drill, and my tool box.

For a moment, I look at the rectangular planks on the floor. I chose the extra light wood of sanded birch. As if that makes a difference!

My throat closes up. The wind whistles through the shattered windows, making me shiver. The spooky feeling inside me gives way to a kind of cold rigidity. I have to think about cemeteries. About old cellars. The coffin. How can I do such a thing? How can I even think about that after what I've experienced?

I wipe my mouth and chin with clammy fingers and shake my head. I have no choice. Over and over, I've weighed my options. The national parks the Scrivers stop at are quite a few days' drive from the Yukon. If I take Lou with me, she won't be sitting well-behaved in the passenger seat next to me. I'm sure lots of AMBER alerts will be issued, so I have to stash her out of sight…somewhere.

Like a treasure.

The whistling wind grows louder, sounding like the eerie song of a ghost choir. The door rattles against the frame in a monotonous rhythm. I light a cig and pace in front of an old lifting platform. It's late May. Supplies are stocked and all the other little things are purchased. The week before last, I insulated the hollow space under the double bed with acoustic foam. I was hoping to simply put Lou there, but since I had to slam on the brakes the other day, I realized how dangerous that is. She could be thrown uncontrollably through the space, especially if she's sedated. And then she could break her neck…like Jordan. If I also line the hollow space with blankets, she could suffocate if she is in an unfavorable position. I won't have time to check on her every minute. A week ago, I ripped out the insulation again and tried to put an extra wall in the space, but the wood paneling was too thin for that. I almost disassembled the bed construction into its individual parts.

Then, an idea came to me that has kept me up during the nights: I have to build a box for Lou. A crate is the surest way to get her to the Yukon unscathed and undetected.

Feeling a dark chill, I go to one of the broken windows and look at the RV. The inscription *Travel America* strikes me as mockery. I'm doubting myself, maybe for the first time since I considered abducting Lou. If I'm willing to put her in a box, how far will I go to reach my goal?

After a deep drag, I toss the cig outside and face the boards. Just looking at the wood makes me nauseous, which doesn't help.

But it has to be done. For Lou and for me.

I've already received all the birch boards and lumber in the right size from the hardware store, I just have to assemble them. I take the first board and drill a hole through it where I marked it. My hand is shaking and I stop. The wind sings its song of ghosts and graves. Shadowy thoughts of narrowness and darkness swirl through me. Death. Torture. Darkness. I grit my teeth and keep going, drilling all the holes in the boards. I find it difficult to breathe. Before I move on to the next step, I take a look at Lou's screenshot.

She beams at me. My stomach clenches. I can take her to the Yukon, chain her up if I have to, but using the box is cruel.

I put the phone back in my pocket and reach for the drill again. I can hardly hold it. Angry at myself, I set it aside and clench my hand. So tight it hurts. As if I could force my fingers to stop shaking.

Pull yourself together, you weakling! It's not you that'll go in that box, it's Lou! And that's exactly why you'll sedate her. Not only so she'll be calm, but also so she won't be afraid!

I take a deep breath, open my fist, and hold my hand at eye level. It's still shaking. Fuck! I'm a real loser if I can't build this shitty box. Lips pressed tightly together, I reach for the screw. This work is important. I have to do it right, the result is for Lou's safety. End. Of. Discussion.

I screw the first two squared timbers to the boards without looking at Lou's picture again. Pangs of conscience don't help. I put Lou out of my head, focus on what I'm doing. Drilling and screwing. I imagine building a box for my supplies. My hands calm down and the stoic part takes over. I manage to connect the remaining boards and the wood and drill a few more air holes in the boards before I attach the latch to the lid.

My heart pounds as I examine the finished work, but it's not because I'm afraid. I feel too bad to be proud of having made it, but I'm immensely relieved. Considering I've managed this, I can do everything else, as well.

That night, I have an aberrant flash. I managed to chain myself up, but during the blackout, I must have smashed a pile of dishes, that would at least explain the pile of broken glass I find the next morning. A cupboard door has been torn off and is lying on the floor. If I were to have an attack in the Yukon, I'm sure the best thing would be to chain myself to a tree outside.

Having cleaned up the mess and fixed the door, I start shopping for Lou's clothes around noon. I order most of them online and have them delivered to Ramon's address. Some of the things I can't find at all and I end up selecting a few pieces that I like. I realize that I favor black a lot even though I've enjoyed seeing Lou in a white shirt.

Besides ordering the clothes, I find a medical student on the darknet who is willing to share his knowledge of narcotics with me for cash. After all, I just want to sedate Lou, not kill her. She also has to be awake enough to drink water and go to the bathroom, but not be able to remember anything afterwards. And under no circumstances should she know that I'm transporting her to the Yukon in this shitty box.

I carefully write down all the combinations, but still memorize them. The only remaining problem is the chloroform. I can't give drops to Lou, I only have a rough dosage. So I decide to test it out on myself. But for that I need Ramon. For the first time, he has scruples and I have to double the amount I offered him so he agrees to knock me out.

In the end, we need four tries to get the right dose. The first few times he used too much chloroform. I was gone after a breath or two, but it took me a long time to come around. A little too long, Ramon said. I don't want to take any chances with Lou. The chloroform comes from a chemical company's warehouse that some

of Ramon's buddies broke into. It hasn't been diluted, so it is much stronger than I anticipated. On the fourth try, Ramon only used half of what we used on the third try. It took longer to get me into deep sleep, but only two minutes to wake up. I made a note of this dosage and, estimating Lou's weight, calculated hers.

Now there's only one thing left to do. I'll have to be around people, but I'll first have to take care of my appearance. If Lou sees me in my current state, she will never come with me. And that's ultimately what she has to do to make my plan work. Come with me and get into the RV—the rest should be easy.

CHAPTER 5

It's June 25th. I've been standing behind a sequoia tree at the edge of the *Lodgepole* Visitor Center since six this morning, never taking my eyes off the spacious parking lot. Today, Lou and her brothers will arrive at Sequoia National Park, assuming her itinerary wasn't made up.

A dark, euphoric tingling in my stomach ascends to my chest. I've been here since last night. I parked the RV in a turnout on the main road so that it can't be seen from the visitor center.

I dive deeper into the shadow of the tree and pull up the corners of my mouth, trying to put on that smile I've been practicing every day for the last month. A harmless but confident smile that won't scare Lou.

With a rehearsed gesture, I brush my hair back. For the first time in my life, I'm happy with my appearance. With a little concentration, I even manage to push back the furtive look in my eyes, although I've put my eye drops with the belladonna in my pocket just to be safe.

Again, I stare at the parking lot and try to suppress the rush of excitement, joy, and fear in me. I know I won't get many chances, maybe only one. Unconsciously, my hand twitches to the pocket where I've stashed the bottle of chloroform, the sedation drops, and a couple of zip ties. Originally, I wanted to think of a concrete strategy to lure Lou into the RV, but I can't exactly plan something

like that, it has to arise spontaneously from a situation. She might linger around after a hike, lag behind her brothers, and I can talk to her. Maybe I'll put on a bandage and ask her if she can help me with something, but for that she would have to be without her brothers.

Maybe the plan to lure her into the RV won't even work. Then I'd have to kidnap Lou from her brothers' tent at night, which makes the whole endeavor more difficult. I'd have to use the knockout gas, but I'm afraid I'd hurt Lou with it. She's the lightweight of the Scrivers and a dose that puts Avery or Ethan in a deep sleep could cause her to stop breathing. No, the RV variation is the better option, even if it demands a lot more from me.

I smile again and my gaze wanders to the center's entrance road. You have to drive over the steep pass and only enter from the right. What if they don't even show up? Perhaps Lou posted some crap to mislead me? Could she have somehow realized I'd been stalking her for months?

I press my hands against my temples. No, impossible. Lou couldn't have noticed, could she? I never commented or messaged her. But her overly cautious brother may have decided to change their itinerary—precisely because Lou posted it.

Ethan. The shadow of a dark thought falls over me. Of course, he knows what perverse fantasies a girl like Lou can awaken in men's minds. He'll probably guard her like a hawk. My hands tremble with suppressed anger as I imagine him thwarting my plans and I take several deep breaths.

I need to calm down. I can't think about Ethan. I can't think about anything that upsets me. I can't afford another flashback. I have already had too many these past few weeks. Again, I feel like a jack-in-the-box just waiting to shoot up as soon as the lid pops open.

I keep waiting. The sun climbs to its zenith and starts to sink again. In the meantime, three RVs have turned off the access road and taken places in the area for larger vehicles. The area is to my right, separated only by a few hawthorn bushes, and the children's voices buzz toward me like gnats.

Around two thirty it is so hot, even in the shade, that sweat runs down my back. Soon after, the hoodie is glued to my skin and I could curse for not wearing a T-shirt. I'm considering taking it off when I suddenly spot a gray Toyota on the access road. Lou posted her brother's car months ago with mayo under the door handles in revenge for one of Ethan's pranks. With nerve-racking slowness, the car rolls into the parking lot directly toward the visitor center.

My mouth is bone dry. Even at this distance, I can make out a young blond man at the wheel. *Ethan*? In the picture Lou secretly posted of him, he's wearing a pigtail and his expression is dour.

Like a shadow moving with the sun, I move around the trunk to keep an eye on the car. I peek through the sparse foliage of a hedge in the direction of the parking lot. It really is Ethan, I recognize him quite easily! He is even wearing a red-and-white checkered shirt.

Suddenly, chaos erupts in my head. I've waited so long for this moment, it now flies by without me really understanding what's happening.

The Toyota comes to a halt between me and the visitor center, immediately after, all four doors swing open. Lou's brothers get out almost simultaneously; they seem to me like phantoms that spring from my imagination. But they are real, less than a hundred feet away from me.

Ethan, with a pinched face and hands on hips; tan Liam, with incredibly long hair and a blissful grin like he smoked a joint along the way; Jayden, with tangled strands sticking up from his head, clearly the youngest of the brothers; and Avery, the tallest, soft-featured, the one most closely resembling Lou.

But where is Lou?

Cold creeps up my spine: She stayed at home with friends!

Her boyfriend?

My hands involuntarily clench as I glare icily at the Toyota. Avery leans in again and says something I cannot make out from here.

"My goodness, she should just stay in the car, then," I hear one of them call out, annoyed. "But then she won't know where the showers are either!"

A shiver of relief runs down my spine. Avery is still talking. Lou probably just doesn't want to get out. As if she knew I was standing here waiting for her.

Maybe I should just get in the car with her, drug her, and hotwire the car once her brothers are gone. I glance at her siblings.

"Jesus Christ!" Ethan yells, who is now standing under the covered entrance. "Leave her be if she wants to sulk!" He disappears inside the visitor center and Liam and Jayden follow while Avery continues to lean toward the back seat, gesturing widely.

Suddenly, he backs away and a blonde girl climbs out. Just like that. As if this moment had no meaning.

I want to fall to my knees. Lou is real, truly real! Sunrays bounce off her hair, which she has tied in a high ponytail. For seconds, I can only stare without thinking, without breathing. I find her even more delicate than in her photos. Even brighter, even lighter. She giggles and elbows Avery in the ribs, then laughs and pulls up her blouse, which has slipped over her shoulder. Avery also laughs, and in that moment, I envy him fiercely for the many years by her side. How good that must feel!

When I can breathe again, it's as if the weight of my loneliness burdens me even more. Just like in front of the monster's house, a veil of red fog sweeps through my mind and dazes me. Lou pokes Avery in the ribs again and again until he playfully punches her in the upper arm. They laugh, Lou nods toward the visitor center and says something to Avery that makes him grin.

I stare after them as they step in side by side, my hand wandering to the zip ties, knockout drops, and chloroform in my pocket.

"Soon," I hear myself say. Softly and stoically as if I had to calm myself so as not to rush after them.

A half an hour later, when the Scrivers exit the visitor center with Lou linking arms with Avery, I retreat further into the woods. I walk parallel to the gravel road when at some point the gray Toyota drives

past me. I jog behind them, hidden by the trees, but turn around as soon as I see where they pitch their tent.

Knowing Lou is within reach puts me on an emotional roller coaster and I fear another attack.

Back in the RV, I rip my sweaty clothes off, get in the shower, and figure out how to fix the flashback problem. Maybe I should use my eye drops with the atropine before our first meeting. Then I wouldn't see Lou so clearly, I could stay cooler, and my eyes would definitely not be that of a hunter on the prowl due to the dilated pupils. Besides, it would also be good to minimize other stimuli. In L.A., I even managed to use the eye drops to move around in a large crowd for a short time without getting a flash. The drops are for iris inflammation, but if used cautiously, they are not harmful. At least that's what the medical student wrote on the darknet. And of course I use a low-dose variant.

Still—should I really manage to lure and sedate Lou here—who will drive the RV? After using the drops I'm sometimes farsighted for up to two hours. I can't possibly stay in this place any longer than necessary. On the other hand, a hasty departure would be just as conspicuous. It might even be better to wait a bit. Yes, waiting a bit is definitely the better option.

After the shower, I slip into a clean black hoodie and dark cargo pants. Maybe Lou is more into jeans, but I need the pockets. At least the outfit doesn't make me look like a square, more like an adventurer, which is what Lou wants.

I smile to myself, this time out of an inner need. One last time, I check the steel brackets on the walls, the iron chains in the upper kitchen cupboard, and the handcuffs right next to it. I dig my tools out of my old pants and deposit the nostrum into the cargo pocket before I carefully inspect the RV.

The inside feels too sterile, like the working environment of a lunatic who likes gutting young girls. A girl like Lou, growing up with four brothers, might be suspicious of this tidiness. It looks too *arranged*. I quickly grab my leather jacket from the upper compartment and throw it on the bench in the front area, then I put an opened bottle of Coke and a glass on the table. Or better yet a

beer? No, Coke fits better, I wouldn't want her to think I'm a drunk. I look around again. It still looks far too tidy. At least for a guy who is traveling alone with an RV. Nervous, I glance at the clock. Five thirty. I rip open a cupboard and carelessly scatter granola bars, bandages, pens, rubber bands, cups, and two plates on the worktop.

Definitely better!

Finally, I squeeze myself back into the tiny bathroom and smile my confident smile. Then, I get the eye drops out of my old pants and put them in my pocket. Maybe I'll get a chance to talk to Lou today. Maybe I can win her trust during the second encounter or maybe she'll directly accompany me. Better to be prepared for any eventuality.

Opposite the turnout is the part of the forest that leads to the tent campground.

I look around carefully, but there are no cars or hikers to be seen as I disappear between the gray shadows of the trees. In this section of Lodgepole, the sequoias stand close together, their canopies forming a solid green umbrella above me. Hardly a ray of light falls on the ground, but despite the protective dim light, I am careful. I can't rule out that playing children might venture into the area. The gravel road isn't far off, maybe a little less than half a mile to the west, as are the tent campgrounds and public bathrooms. It would be fatal if, afterward, someone remembered I was sneaking through the forest here.

When I'm within three hundred feet of the Scrivers' site, I move stealthily as if I were stalking a caribou. Single shouts penetrate the forest followed by voices and laughter.

I look around cautiously. To the left of the Scrivers is an unoccupied campsite and to their right is a blue-and-yellow family tent with a canopy surrounded by a circle of boulders. Dark smoke and the smell of steaks drift toward me. Through the branches of a young incense-cedar, I see two little girls hopping up and down beside the tent, digging their hands into the soft fabric of the tent.

I inch even closer.

“Are these all the clothes you brought?” I suddenly hear a voice that I attribute to Ethan solely because of the unfriendly tone. I stop.

“Yes. So what?”

Lou’s words make me duck behind a young sequoia. It’s slim and tall, but big enough to completely hide me if I don’t move.

“No long pants? No sweaters?” Ethan continues to rant. “What about your hiking boots?”

“I can walk in my Chucks."

I bought you hiking boots, Lou. If only I could see you! She sounds so close. It’s so wonderful to hear her voice. Live, not thousands of miles through a laptop speaker.

“Or these sandals, which you didn’t pay me back for yet. Where exactly did you think we were vacationing? A spa-hotel campground?” Ethan scoffs grimly.

Wild giggles come from the left of me.

“Rain? Summer? Stop this nonsense!”

“Rain started it… Daddy, Daddy…”

When the girl suddenly falters, I hold my breath and turn toward the children’s voices. Did they spot me? I don’t see them anymore, and instead, an aged hippie in a Hawaiian shirt appears next to the tent, tongs raised like a forefinger.

“And where are the two camping lanterns?” Ethan hisses from the front. In slow motion, I squat down and pray none of the girls saw me.

“That was Summer!” a child’s voice screeches.

“You really are completely useless.” Ethan again. “It’s not like I asked you to think of a thousand things. It was only the two lanterns and the tablecloth. That was it! Three things. Shouldn’t have been too difficult even for you.”

Summer and Rain seem to have forgotten their argument, no wonder, given the way Ethan is yelling. Fortunately, the sudden silence next door ensures that I understand every word again.

“Sorry.” Lou sounds pissed.

“Maybe you left them home on purpose.”

“I didn’t! I simply forgot about them.”

"Like your math stuff?" Something bangs, it sounds like a trunk lid. "Go to the visitor center and buy two new ones. Right now!"

Subconsciously, my hand reaches for the chloroform bottle. You want her to go to the visitor center? *Alone*? I need to see. As quietly as possible, I straighten up and look over the trunk to my left, just in time to catch Ethan pressing a couple of bills into Lou's fingers.

"Can I also buy some bear spray?" Lou asks in a lower voice, fear flickering across her face for a brief moment before stubbornly jutting out her chin. I know that facial expression. That hard expression is an attempt to hide fear. I've seen it hundreds of times in my previous opponents' gazes. And suddenly I realize that all this is just another fight.

I can't hear what Ethan says, but Lou doesn't seem to like it. Her gaze darts to Avery before locking on to Ethan again.

"But I'm scared of bears," she now says defiantly, and again, I can see that anxious expression on her face.

"Only the lanterns. Nothing else, got it?" Ethan snaps at her.

"Maybe I'll catch the next bus home. Or somewhere else!" Lou snaps. She sounds close to crying.

"Yes, yes, of course, just make sure you catch the right bus!"

He really is sending her off alone! Blood pounds in my ears like a storm and I hear Lou's words like I'm wrapped in a layer of cotton. Something with *Dad* and *mean* and *useless*. *I hate you!*

She storms off, hands clenched, and my dazed feeling lifts. My mind races as I stoop behind some bushes before following her through the woods parallel to the gravel road.

So you're afraid of bears, Lou. And not just a little…

For four years I had fought and I had won. Nobody was ever able to hide their feelings from me. The monster taught me to carefully observe and pay attention to subtleties. On Thorson Ave, it was for my survival. A man's frown could herald an approaching tantrum and result in beatings. Depending on its strength, sometimes even with the belt. Turned-down corners of the mouth rarely meant mockery, but rather triumph. Punishments in the basement in the dark followed. Sometimes, I anticipated and countered these facial expressions but not always. In Compton and South Central, my skill

brought me countless wins. Often it was merely a twitch in the cheek or a frantic in-place prance. It has always told me which attack my adversary feared most. Heel kicks in the thigh, knee jabs in the ribs, punches in the stomach—his weakness that I used to bring him down.

The blood returns to my clammy fingers like I'm about to pound my fists in someone's face. But there's only Lou. With her hands under her armpits, she keeps looking around as if she is scared.

At some point, she stops and looks in my direction. I stand stock-still behind a hawthorn and look back. She couldn't have seen me since the sun is too low for that. Hardly a speck of light can be seen between the individual sequoias, the thorn bushes, and boulders, even in this area. Besides, I'm too far away.

Still, to me, it seems like we're looking at each other. She and I. Prey and hunter. Trophy and winner.

Soon, you'll be mine, sweet Lou. Only mine. Then I can look at you whenever I want. Be close to you whenever I want.

My chest fills with searing heat as if it had been hollow before. It burns so deep, reaching so deep inside me that it frightens me. The moment seems to last forever, but then she shakes her head as though at herself. Her blonde ponytail swings back and forth and she keeps walking.

With every step I take, it becomes clearer that I won't get a better chance to abduct her than today. She even threatened Ethan to run away! If she disappears now, it'll look like she ran away at first.

From the forest, I watch Lou suddenly leave the gravel road and turn into the family camping area. The sequoias over there are less dense and I slow down. I'd best let her go to the visitor center first. I could offer her my help in buying the lamps. My guess is that Lou doesn't know a thing about them, just like she doesn't know a thing about math and logic.

What are the chances I'll take you with me today, Lou? You don't know, of course!

The thought suddenly pops into my head, but I feel like an ass.

When a branch snaps behind me, I turn around in alarm. A slender figure rushes past me less than fifty yards away.

Damn, I almost forgot about the trail I had discovered this morning!

The figure rushes forward at a steady pace and only when it's a little ahead of me do I identify it as one of Lou's brothers. It's the youngest with the tousled hair. Jayden. He bumps into Lou between two campers, there is a brief scuffle, and then I watch them talk to each other.

Please don't tell me he wants to play protector now? I stare at him hostilely. *Go away and let her go in alone!*

Instinctively, my hand wanders to the chloroform bottle in my pocket. I'd love to sedate both of them and then carry Lou to my RV, but of course that won't do.

Jayden continues talking to her, but a sweet smell suddenly distracts me from the scene. *Fucking shit!*—I opened the bottle of chloroform! The pungent smell of marzipan and chemicals immediately sickens me.

I nervously screw the brown bottle's lid closed and wipe my fingers on a few leaves. When I look up, Jayden is leaving with saggy shoulders and Lou quickly crosses the road and disappears into the visitor center.

I breathe a sigh of relief and wait until Jayden is out of sight before I grab the eye drops from the other pocket. One drop in each eye to dilate the pupil, block out stimuli, and not freak out when I face Lou.

Suddenly, I realize how close I am to my goal. A strange calm settles over me. A familiar feeling from another time. I almost forgot. I feel like I'm in the last minute before a fight.

I never lose.

I practice my rehearsed, easy smile once more and become someone who is a complete stranger to me. Someone I would like to be but can never be.

For a moment, I think of the house on Thorson Ave, the basement, the man, and my escape. And the little boy I left behind who's still trapped down there. Alone and lonely, with the dreams of

his Little Miss Sunshine. I want to tell him that everything will be fine soon, but I don’t know if he hears me.

CHAPTER 6

I enter the visitor center without looking left or right. The light is harsh and I blink a few times to keep the brightness from triggering a flashback. A hot tingle runs down my neck. Lou is somewhere in here, but I don't want to draw attention to me by searching for her.

Make your opponent feel safe. I hear my fight coach's voice in my head. Buzz Hansen. As always, he's right.

With long strides, I go to the freezers, which I can clearly see from afar. When I stand directly in front of them, I can no longer read the writing on the packages. That's the downside of these eye drops: close-up vision is blurry while distant vision is as good as ever. I want to grab something at random just to look busy, but then I take a moment to think about it. If I talk to Lou, I should carry something she likes too. Similar preferences incite sympathy. I strain to see the pictures on the neatly stacked boxes and happily discover fish sticks. I pull them out carelessly, trying with all my might not to look for Lou. She must be looking for the lanterns in the camping equipment department.

I go to the nearest cupboard and grab an iced coffee from the refrigerated section. The third thing I recognize well and know is one of Lou's favorites is donuts. I stack everything on top of each other. My ears start to buzz and the tingling in my neck gets so bad, I can hardly stand it anymore.

I turn around carefully and look up. No surveillance cameras—at least none that are visible. There probably aren't any. Surveillance cameras are designed to deter thieves, so they're mounted where everyone can see them.

My gaze continues to wander from right to left through the room to a nook next to the entrance area.

Lou is standing there staring at me!

Fuck! For seconds, I'm unable to move, I'm so transfixed by her full attention. For the very first time, she notices me! Somehow, that stuns me. Her mouth is slightly open and her blonde hair falls over her shoulders like a curtain of golden silk. One of them is bare because her blouse slipped off it. Didn't she have her hair in a ponytail earlier? I blink briefly. She's so sweet, it sends a burning pang through my insides. I also know why: The truth is clear. A girl like Lou would never get involved permanently with someone as broken as me. Lou is light and I am darkness. I truly realize this the moment she faces me.

My gut contracts. From longing. From excitement. From something I can't name.

She'll soon be yours. Soon, she'll be yours and then it doesn't matter who she might have gotten involved with…

The propitious voice winds through my mind, but I push it back. Lou is still looking at me, holding a black can. Since Lou is in the camping department, it's probably the bear repellent spray she was so desperate to buy earlier.

Weakness, screams the part of my mind that isn't dazed by her appearance. *Weakness. Weakness. Weakness. Strike already!*

It takes more strength than a heavy-hitting melee to break away from her gaze. As if hypnotized, I go to the checkout while my mind continues to work. She's afraid of bears and it's almost dark outside. She has to walk back alone. What if I tell her there are bears on the dirt road? If I offer to drive her back to her campsite?

"Ten dollars!" The man behind the counter gives me an odd look. Maybe I'm just imagining it because I'm seeing his face as if through a distorted magnifying glass. I force myself to smile and pull out a bill. Just don't pay with a card that can be used to verify my identity.

The man nods at me and puts the bill in the register.

I turn around, the goal in sight. I think of all the psychological support strategies Buzz had taught me when I was a beginner.

Stay *calm. Deep breaths with the abdomen. No sudden movements that give you away. Never forget your center of gravity. Control everything.*

Resolutely, I head for the nook and push my hair back. Lou is still standing with the can in her hand. It is bear repellent. What has she been doing all this time?

When I've almost reached her, she suddenly turns. Anger gathers in my stomach. She shouldn't turn away, she should talk to me!

I purposefully stand in front of the shelf with the camping lanterns to give her a reason to speak to me. My back starts to tingle just knowing she's behind me. I want to turn and touch her right now!

Although her proximity drives me crazy, I'm trying to decipher the names of the brands so I can better advise her. She still doesn't say anything. At some point, it dawns on me that she probably doesn't dare to. After all, I'm much older than her.

Lou is shy! Hell knows why I like that realization so much. "The bear spray is useless." I take the first step. My voice is brimming with superiority. "Total scam," I add, not wanting her to purchase it. "At least I don't know anyone who's successfully taken out a bear with it." I turn on my heels and smile my rehearsed smile. Now that I think she might be insecure, I'm finding it surprisingly easy.

She looks up at me but doesn't say anything. Her face is blurred, the only thing I see is a deep northern-sky blue as if we were standing under the wide Yukon sky. Suddenly, I feel like she sprayed repellent at me.

To take my mind off her eyes, I point to the can in her hand. "All that is going to do is provoke them." I hear my voice, which suddenly seems completely foreign to me. "In fact, if you're super unlucky, it'll make them want to attack you. Especially if your aim is off." I take a step toward her. God, why is she still silent! Don't make it so difficult for me, Lou!

"You must not go camping much," I say. A direct statement that forces an answer.

"But what if there's suddenly one in front of me?" she blurts out so suddenly that I want to laugh. "Um, a…a bear, I mean…?" She hesitates and briefly looks down as if embarrassed by what she said.

Does she like me? Is that why she's so shy? That thought turns me on and I grow even bolder. "Stand still. Keep calm." When she looks at me again, my smile is real. I'm glad I can talk about something I know about. "Just wait until it goes away. If it comes closer, you should sing or clap your hands—loud noises will scare most black bears off."

"Okay." Her whisper sends a hot-cold shiver down my spine. She puts the can back. "I'm supposed to buy a camping lantern. Do you know anything about them?"

"To hang or to put on the table?" I keep my eyes on her. Without realizing it, she gets more and more involved in the fight, not feeling the individual blows that gradually force her to the ground.

"To put on the table." She clears her throat awkwardly. Her fingers fiddle with a chain. I can't see its details, but I hear a faint tinkle. No question, she's nervous. A prancing opponent.

"I forgot our lanterns at home and my brother sent me here to buy new ones," she adds as if it matters.

I just nod. That gives away nothing after all. I turn to the shelf and grab one of the top camping lanterns. It has a yellow SZ on its bulging body so I can identify the brand without needing to read the price tag. "Solarez are the best. They give off plenty of light without blinding you." I hold out the lamp to her, but she doesn't take it from me, just looks at it from all sides. As if she had a clue about technology. In the end, her gaze lingers on my scar, at least that's what I imagine. With all my might, I suppress the dark memory that rises up inside me like black slag and that clogs my thinking.

"I'm Louisa," she says suddenly, looking up at me with disarming frankness.

My friends call me Lou.

"Bren." I can't stop looking at her, even though all I can see is a blurred mixture of blue and blonde. What would she say if I just

invited her over to my RV for a drink? What if she stayed with me forever willingly? If she would promise to never leave me?

"Just Bren?" She pulls me out of my thoughts.

I blink dazedly and curse myself for being so easily distracted. I swear it won't happen to me again. Lou can look as innocent as she wants to.

"Brendan," I reply softly, looking at the cash register. Luckily, the cashier doesn't pay any attention to us, I don't think he even noticed I was talking to Lou. Otherwise, there is hardly anyone in the store who could possibly remember me later on. Just an unnerved mother who keeps her son from shoving tin cans off the shelves and a couple who are madly in love and who only have eyes for each other. Nevertheless, I have to go now if my story with the bear is to be believable afterward.

"I've gotta go." I hand Lou the camping lamp and, sounding rather harsh, I add, "Maybe I'll see you around."

She smiles. "Are you staying a while?" Is there disappointment in her voice?

I look at the couple in love who are in the middle of a deep kiss. "Couple more days."

"Same here."

"Yeah." *I know*. I nod to her. "Later."

"Yes."

I clutch the thawing frozen items to my stomach and disappear before the mother and the couple can get a better look at me.

I want to turn my head back to Lou, but that might arouse suspicion.

As I cross the parking lot, my thoughts race. What am I gonna do with this damn frozen food? There's no way I can keep it with me, I want Lou to think I've put it away. Suddenly, it seems to me that *my* logical thinking has left me. Or should I take it with me?

I walk down the dirt road toward the Scrivers' campground and spontaneously dump the frozen items into one of the big dumpsters.

I look around the area appraisingly. The evening sun lies pale behind a layer of clouds and only a few single golden-red rays hit the ground. Above me, the wind whips through the gigantic

treetops. No one is around, no one on the path. They're probably all sitting together in front of their campfires, eating steaks and drinking beer. The perfect time.

I walk back, keeping an eye on the visitor center's exit. It's about a hundred yards to the access road when I see Lou coming out, lantern in hand. She pauses for a moment and it looks like she's playing with one of the camping lanterns.

If she asks me about the frozen food, I can still claim I bought them for a friend. My hand instinctively goes to the outside pocket of the cargo pants where I stowed the chloroform. Again, I feel this intense, deep burning—a mixture of anticipation, fear, and excitement.

Not much longer now.

As I cross the road and enter the parking lot, she spots me. While she appears surprised, it doesn't seem to be an unpleasant one to her.

I approach her with determination and mentally play through the maneuver that was repeatedly drummed into me before fights.

Attack. Feign backing off. No give-away moves. Breathe deeply. Attack again. This time with all force.

Jordan Price pops into my head, but I push the memory of him away.

"Hey, Louisa." Without meaning to, my gaze slides down her face. At least outside my dilated pupils don't blind me that much, but my vision is still poor. It would be fatal to engage in a fight, but Lou weighs no more than a hundred ten pounds, so it won't be a real fight. "Bad news," I say, putting on what I hope is a worried expression.

"What?" Irritated, she clings to the lanterns and shifts from one foot to the other.

"There's a mama black bear with her cubs by the dumpsters."

Despite the belladonna, I see her freeze. "That's exactly the direction I'm going."

I hear the panic in her words and inwardly congratulate myself. "You'd better wait until they leave. Mother bears always get crazy aggressive if they think someone's threatening their cubs." I think for

a moment, searching for details to make the lie credible. “Some idiot forgot to lock one of the dumpsters. Same thing happens every year. It may be hours before they finish eating.”

Lou looks fearfully in the direction of the forest. “I have to get back,” she says vehemently.

No, you don’t! I purse my lips in anger and shake my head. “You can’t get past there.”

“But my brothers…” Her voice cracks. Her eyes dart to the visitor center and back to me. “They’ll be looking for me. We should tell the rangers. I’ve gotta…”

“Louisa.” I raise my hand reassuringly. Of course she thinks of her brothers! Luckily, I’ve already thought of something for this situation. “The rangers are already there, making sure everyone’s safe,” I say quickly, before she rushes headlong into the visitor center. “They’re not going to let anyone get anywhere near the bears.”

“Really?” she asks hopefully.

I just nod. Her brothers might actually pose a problem. If I were one of them, I certainly wouldn’t let Lou walk around at dusk. Somehow, it serves Ethan right when she disappears because he didn’t take better care of her. He doesn’t deserve her at all!

“And they’ll be on both sides of the dumpsters?” Lou asks, interrupting my reverie. Her voice still sounds shrill. I need to reassure her before she decides to go and see for herself.

“Um, of course,” I say as calmly and deliberately as I can. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

My tone of voice has its effect. She exhales in relief and I turn briefly to the gravel path. Would be damn conspicuous if someone was walking along there now! I have to lure her away from here as soon as possible, but it’s still too early for the all-important question. I convince myself to banter a bit: “There’s always some idiot trying to take pictures. This one tourist in Canada even tried to get his daughter to ride on a grizzly’s back.”

Her eyes widen and become as round as those of a china doll. “No way!”

“I swear to God!” I affirm. “Luckily nothing happened.”

She laughs and I join in because that's the expected reaction, not because I feel like it. I almost wince at how artificial it sounds, but Lou keeps smiling.

Time for the next attack. "I was headed back to the visitor center." Like a gentleman, I reach for the lanterns and manage to grab them out of her hands. "Forgot tomatoes. But if you want to get back to your brothers, I can drive you around the long way to your campsite." *No telltale movements. Deep breaths into the abdomen*.

"There's another road?" she asks, genuinely surprised. "The ranger didn't mention that."

I grip the lanterns so tightly, the metal handle cuts into my skin. Anything she repeats back that might distract me from my plan automatically makes me angry. I have to pay attention. "There are three actually," I claim, trying to confuse her even more. "But the third will be blocked off too because it's too close to the dumpsters. People don't take the other route much because it goes a few miles through the forest and it's got a million potholes." I don't know why I have to stare at her bare shoulder and the strap of her white bra during the last sentence.

As if in response to this, Lou uneasily pulls up her blouse.

I could bang my head against a concrete post! Now all that remains is the sneakiest of tricks.

"You shouldn't walk that whole way by yourself," I say quieter than usual. "Really." I meet her eyes, feigning concern. She looks back—I'm not looking away. Only liars look the other way. Or cowards.

And as if the sky wants to support me, the cloud cover rips open and reveals the orange-red sun. There is a radiance in the air, a radiance like a thousand glittering grains of gold.

Lou smiles. Maybe because of my words, but maybe also because of the red-gold evening light. Her insecurity has vanished.

"What about your tomatoes? Don't you want to grab them first?" she asks, eyes sparkling.

I'll have her soon. I know it. She's still smiling, and for a moment, all I can think about is soon that smile will be mine, too.

I quickly wave my hand. "I'm right over there, a little way down the road."

We look at each other again. Lou's eyes sparkle in high spirits and the question she asked the world a while ago echoes inside me: *Don't you also dream that something will finally happen?* She probably thinks I was trying to hit on her. Maybe she thinks I'm her adventure. A bit bold, but basically harmless. She's so naive, so absolutely trusting. I almost feel sorry for her and yet everything within me is tingling.

I can actually pull this off.

What if you just invite her over for a beer?

I don't know where that voice comes from, but I push it back. Girls like Lou are into the *knight in shining armor*, *Prince Charming* type and not screwed-up psychopaths like myself. It's possible to talk her into that, but I would never, never have her forever.

I take the lanterns in one hand so I can dig the car keys out of my pocket. It's high time to leave the parking lot before one of Lou's brothers shows up. Once more, I look across the parking lot. Luckily, I only see one man heaving his luggage out of the trunk. Without turning around, he heads straight for the visitor center.

Regardless, I turn my back on him just to be on the safe side. "It's not far," I say, my voice rougher than intended.

Lou nods and I walk as a barrier between her and the visitor center, just in case. I glance again at the gravel path, but it lies deserted in the twilight.

Lou walks beside me and our silence is broken only by the clatter of lanterns and the jingle of keys. I hope she won't back down when she sees the RV. I look at her from the corner of my eye and notice that my visual acuity is slowly returning to normal. I watch her glance at the swaying treetops and then turn her face into the wind. As if she couldn't get enough of it all. Still, she shivers.

"You're shivering," I state. I hope she's not afraid of her own courage.

"I'm not cold."

Really? And yet you're trembling! I smile. *Maybe you're trembling with excitement*. Frantically, I search for a harmless topic of

conversation but can't think of anything. I'm so close to my goal. With difficulty, I force myself to calm down.

In the meantime, we have left the parking lot and the sky is darkening again. Huge shadows hang in the forest, gray and spooky as if a setting for a horror movie.

"We're almost there," I say, breaking the silence before Lou becomes too aware of the eerie surroundings. I vaguely point along the road to where the RV is two hundred yards away.

"So you're here with your family?" Lou looks at me, confused.

The word *family* makes me think of the rocking teddy bear mobile on Thorson Ave. *No, sweet Lou, not everyone has a big happy family*. The angry thought suddenly pops up as if someone else thought it for me. Then I recall that she lost her parents and force myself to smile so as not to scare her. "Just me."

She seems relieved. "I pictured you with a car and a tent," she babbles on cheerfully.

She almost makes me laugh with her naive carelessness. That's exactly what I loved about her in the pictures. The pink, sugar-sweet, light, intangible life that, like breath, flows out of her.

"Is there a difference between tent guys and RV guys?" I ask, trying to keep her in this innocent state.

She chews her bottom lip briefly, then shrugs. "I dunno," she replies evasively. "Um. You just…looked like a tent guy, I dunno. I guess I thought maybe because you know so much about…bears and stuff."

I smile again, that awful syrupy smile that now seems glued to my face. "The RV gives me more flexibility."

"It's huge. You could fit a family of five in there."

"I need space. Sometimes I spend the whole summer on the road." That's not even a lie.

"So what do you do in winter?" she blurts out.

It seems she actually likes me. Good. That's better than if she found me repulsive.

"Work," I say mysteriously.

"Oh." Her cheeks flush and a shy smile tugs at the corners of her mouth—and one echoes in the region of my heart.

When we reach the RV, I glance at the main road, which is completely empty. No car, no lone hiker. Only seconds separate me from my goal. *A few steps*. Suddenly my hands are damp and I walk stiffly to the passenger door. I pretend to unlock it.

"Ah, fuck," I curse loudly for Lou to hear. "Stuck again." I purposefully jerk on the door handle several times. Nothing happens, of course, since I didn't really unlock the door. I turn to Lou, who has stopped along the side. I shrug apologetically and try to manage an embarrassed grin. "Sorry. You mind getting in the back and then climbing up front?"

"No problem." A suspicious shadow flits across her relaxed features, just a fraction of a second, but I saw it.

Everything's under control.

I quickly walk past her and unlock the side door. Shit, it's totally dark in the RV. It probably scares her. For a moment, I consider drugging her in front of the RV, but that would be risky. Someone might hear her scream. I open the door as wide as I can and step aside so she can climb the steps. The mess I created makes it seem harmless, normal.

But maybe that's not enough. Lou hesitates, peering cautiously into the living area as if I'm hiding a monster there. She glances at me. There's a strange, pleading look in her eyes as if she suspects something but doesn't want to admit it. I try to overplay her suspicions with a smile and remember my strategy. *Feign retreat*. I take a deep breath and a step back.

"Hey, I'm Bren, not Jack," I say, feigning ease. Hopefully that takes the wind out of her sails.

"Jack?"

She can't be that stupid! I raise my hands theatrically, carefully so as not to bang the lanterns together. "The Ripper," I explain, grinning, and clumsily stuff the car keys into my pocket.

Lou laughs. I think I've finally convinced her now.

To be on the safe side, I back down for appearances' sake, this time only symbolically. "We could walk if you'd prefer. It's kind of far, but I understand if you…"

"No, it's fine." Lou shakes her head vigorously as if I shouldn't see her doubts. She probably doesn't want me to think of her as an anxious little girl. She's trying to please me. This touches me deeply, and for a few seconds, I feel lost. Lonelier than ever, I'm not sure why. Maybe because she makes it so easy for me, because she's so damn naive and believes in the good in me—something I've failed at for a long time.

As she climbs the steps, I only look at her blonde hair. Her blonde hair that captured me that first minute. A storm of sensations races through me and I take a few deep breaths. Just don't flash. Don't let your feelings get to you. No pity. Nothing.

I just have to do it. The sooner, the better. After all, I didn't prepare for months to be sidetracked by her trusting bliss at the crucial moment. Maybe she's doing it on purpose. Maybe that's why she's smiling oh-so-innocently all around. *Ha!*

The thought makes me angry. I follow her, and when I pull the door shut with determination, it's as if I'm shutting out all my emotions as well. *That's it! Just stop feeling sorry for her or this will go belly-up!*

Step by step, I go up the stairs with the camping lamps in one hand while I fish with the other for the chloroform. Lou hasn't turned to me yet, is still busy looking around the RV. Now she stares at the drawn curtains and pretends to be smaller than she is. Like a rabbit pretends in front of a snake that it's not a worthwhile prey.

Wrong thought!

I stop right behind her, so close I can smell her scent. An unconventional, fresh mixture of Nivea and lemon.

I don't know why, but I'm calm. Nothing can go wrong anymore. Carefully, I pull out the bottle and cloth and awkwardly unscrew the bottle because I'm still holding the lanterns in one hand. It's taking longer than it should.

Lou is still not moving. Maybe she's waiting for me to say something*. Do you want something to drink? Do you want to sit down? Hey, do you want to jump into bed with me? As if!*

Without making a sound, I unfold the cloth and saturate the fabric with the liquid. I've practiced this a thousand times. The

contents of the bottle correspond exactly to the required quantity. It doesn't even take three seconds, still, the chemical sweetness eats through the RV like a fire. Menacing and fast.

Lou makes herself even smaller. Images flash before me, of her turning and laughing in her white shirt in the evening light. Suddenly, I have the terrible feeling that I will lose her if I continue.

But I want her! Oh, how I want her! I shouldn't want her, but I can't help it.

I let go of the lanterns. As if from another plane, I hear the glass shatter.

Before Lou can react, I grab her and press her elbows to her sides. For a moment, she is still, hanging numbly in my grasp. I want to use the seconds to press the cloth over her face, but as I raise my hand, she yanks at her arms, gasping horrified. The cloth slips from my fingers. At the last moment, I clench my hand and hold it tight.

The chloroform evaporates and the heavy, sweet marzipan smell settles on my skin like glue.

Lou starts screaming. "Help!" "No!" "Please!" The back of her head crashes into my chin. Red fog settles before my eyes, triggering a tornado in my head. I pull my hand forward and press the cloth over her mouth and nose. Firmly.

I'm sorry, Lou, I whisper in the darkness of my mind. I'm sorry, but nothing has been more necessary than this. I never want to lose you again.

Dazed, she digs her nails into my thighs in a helpless attempt to resist me. I hardly feel it, but I become aware of her condition. Her back is soaking wet and her body is shaking. She's scared to death.

"Hold still, I'm not going to hurt you," I say close to her ear. Out of instinct, I pull her tighter against me, but she doesn't calm down. Instead, she kicks and catches my shin.

Automatically, I lean back a little and pick her up, her feet thrashing in the air like a fish out of water. I feel her back against my stomach and the pounding of her heart. I press the cloth even harder against her face, wanting it to be over. I mentally count the seconds. *Twenty-one*. It takes too long. *Twenty-two*. Much too long. I can hear her whimpering behind the cloth. At *twenty-three* she

rears up again, but this time she collapses mid-movement, going limp.

All right, she'll be gone any moment now. *You're almost there, Lou!*

"I won't hurt you, don't worry," I whisper again, praying she believes me. At least she will take these words with her into her deep sleep. A second later, she finally collapses.

CHAPTER 7

Lou is hanging upside down in my arms, her blonde hair a falling veil. Even though a moment ago, my mind was in overdrive, I am now absolutely calm. Maybe that's how it feels when you've done something truly bad, I don't know. Maybe it's mere relief that this part is now behind me.

The broken glass from the camping lanterns crunches under my feet as I carry Lou to the bed. I carefully set her down and take her pulse. It's weak but palpable and regular, so everything's okay. The dosage was right.

For a moment, I stand there and stare at her: her soft oval face that now looks so peaceful again as if she's asleep and her sweaty, reddened skin. She has a few tiny freckles on the left and right side below her eyes. Light cinnamon gold—strange, I never noticed them before. What else is there about her that I haven't noticed yet? My gaze lingers on her finely curved lips. Am I imagining it or is her upper lip a bit fuller?

My fingers twitch, wanting to trace the smooth contour. Why not, she won't feel it anyway! Just this once. I reach out my trembling hand, and when I feel the velvety skin against my fingertips, my heart begins to pound.

Lou feels so good. *So good. So soft!* The deep dark burning in my chest flares up with an intensity that knocks me out.

I stroke her lips with my index finger, down to her chin, down her neck…my gaze falls on her bare shoulder.

You shouldn't be walking there alone. Really!

Shocked at myself, I quickly withdraw my fingers as if I've burned myself. What the hell am I doing? I didn't kidnap her to touch her, but to have her with me.

Are you sure?

I ignore the mocking voice in my head and get the chloroform bottle that I barely managed to put on the table earlier. I quickly drizzle a few drops onto the cloth I'm still holding. Again, I look at her from above as she lies there, small and blonde. Somehow I'm glad she looks so peaceful right now after what she's been through.

I have no regrets. There's nothing I'm sorry about except that she was so scared.

I bend down and gently place the soaked cloth over her face to keep her unconscious for a while longer. Then, I sweep up the shards and put them in a plastic bag with the broken lanterns.

Throwing a quick glance at Lou, I pull the knockout drops out of my pocket and get the sleeping drops out of the closet. I drip both into the PET bottle in the correct ratio, which I prepared especially for this purpose. There's only three sips of water left, it won't take long for me to pour it down Lou's throat. At the end, I add dimenhydrinate, the anti-nausea medicine, then I go to the bed and remove the cloth from her face.

I glance at the clock. Two minutes. It won't be long before she'll regain consciousness.

Before she wakes up, I pull a zip tie from my pocket, roll her onto her side, and bind her wrists behind her back. It has to be quick as I don't want her knocking the mix out of my hand. Besides, thanks to the gamma-butyrolactone, she won't remember a thing anyway.

I sit next to her on the bed and pull her up, a bit over my thighs so that her torso is elevated. Her small breasts accommodate me in this position. They shimmer milky white through the wet fabric except for the tiny pink halo in the middle. I can't help it. I stare without really knowing what to think or feel. At some point, I tear my gaze away and let it wander further toward her flat stomach, her

lap, her slender thighs and delicate ankles. Again, a scalding heat rises to my chest, filling every cell of my body with fire. My thoughts burn, melting my mind to nothingness.

Of course, I don't just want to look at her! I want to touch her all over, smell her, taste her skin. My fingers are shaking.

I frown and clench my hand, feeling like pounding it against my temple. I'm not going to touch her like I did before. No matter what she does to me. No matter how good she smells of Nivea lemon and how soft her skin is. Whether she is going to remember it or not. I'm not the kind of guy who'd do that!

Her eyelids flutter and I'm almost relieved not to have to think about it anymore.

"Ethan?" Her voice is hoarse, either from screaming or the chloroform.

"He's not here, Lou." I don't know why I'm saying this. So pitiless, so cold. Maybe to distance myself internally.

"Where…what…" She blinks dazedly, not realizing what's happened to her.

"It's all right, Lou. You don't need to be afraid." The wrong words —she stiffens. "Drink this and then you can go back to sleep." I put the bottle to her lips, but she turns her head away. I expected that and cover her nose.

I think it's only at this moment that she realizes her hands are tied. She tugs at her arms and her eyes widen with fear.

"Drink. I do not want to hurt you."

She gasps for air as the water enters her mouth.

I clench her jaw, not hard, but firmly. "Swallow."

She obeys and I let her breathe. "Once more."

This time she doesn't fight back. She understands quickly.

When she's finished drinking, I slide her back onto the bed. She doesn't move, but I know she can't possibly be already asleep. She is dazed, unable to move, but conscious. In no more than half an hour she will be dozing off.

I turn away from her and pull the folding door of the sleeping area halfway closed behind me. That way, I can keep an eye on her

from the front and react if she gets sick in spite of the dimenhydrinate.

Contrary to my plans, I spontaneously decide to drive off immediately, maybe the hundred and thirty miles to Fresno, maybe more. Right now, no missing person announcement has been made, so I won't encounter police checkpoints and I can leave Lou on the bed while I drive. To keep her from falling off the bed, I roll the two down comforters into sausages and wrap them around her. When she's up on the bed, I can watch her through the rearview mirror, so there's no danger of her choking.

After adjusting the pillows as well, I stow the bag of broken lanterns and shards in one of the upper cupboards. After that, I wash my hands and mist the whole camper with *Amouage's Gold Man*, a heavy, sweet, men's cologne I bought specifically for this purpose. The oriental blend of woods, roses, and spices instantly hangs in the air, drowning out the chloroform.

Before I get behind the wheel, I take one last look at Lou. Her eyes are closed and her breathing is steady. I smile, knock once on the wall, and a slight twitch crosses her face. *Okay, Lou, not in deep sleep yet, but you're pretty far gone*.

As I'm about to start the engine, I see two points of light flicker in the side mirror.

"Louisa!" The exasperated shout penetrates the interior of the RV.

Fucking crap! Lou's brothers!

I'm sure they'll knock and ask me if I've seen a blonde girl. Even before they reach my area, I jump up and climb into the bunk above the driver's cab.

My heart is pounding so hard it makes me nauseous.

"Lou? Lou-u? Where the hell are you?" I think I recognize Ethan's voice.

I quickly check the clock. Just before seven thirty. Lou hasn't been gone that long, he probably isn't overly worried yet. He might also think she's playing a bad joke on them since she said she would get on the next bus. But it's already so dark.

I lie on my stomach and peer through the curtain onto the street. The flashlights flash on the rear of the RV and I recognize faces in the swirling beams of light. It seems Ethan is leading the way, followed by long-haired Liam.

"Jesus, Louisa! If you don't show yourself now, you'll be grounded for all of next year!" Ethan yells so loud, I'm afraid Lou might hear him despite her groggy state. Ethan has stopped and lights up the RV's windows.

Now he's gone completely insane!

I hastily climb back down and close the folding door. I have to do something, or they'll bang on the door, wanting to come in. No way. Maybe the perfume smell doesn't completely cover the chloroform smell.

I am blinded by a beam of light falling directly through the front window and hold my hand in front of my eyes.

"Lou-i-sa!" Ethan yells from further away. I squint against the beam and see Liam standing in front of the RV like a ghost. He spins in circles and lights up everything in his path. He's probably stoned on some Tibetan herbal tea or whatever he's into.

Anger and fear boil up in me. I don't know what I'll do if they get suspicious, but I won't lose. Liam is thin as a hermit and Ethan seems fit, but not a serious opponent. Determined, I open the side door and descend the steps.

"What's going on here?" I hiss in a low voice, pulling the door shut behind me. "Do you have to be so loud? My daughter just fell asleep." It's good I recall what Lou said earlier about the family of five.

"Sorry," Ethan calls out under his breath, aiming the beam of light at my chest like a crosshair. He takes a few steps toward me. "We're looking for our sister. Have you seen her? Short, blonde"—he puts his hand elbow high—"long hair. Sixteen years old…pretty… quite pretty…" I hear a hint of fear in the last couple of words. His state of anger is at a turning point—it's imperative I get out of here.

I pretend to think and slowly shake my head, although my heart is still racing. "No girl came by here. I would have noticed." I look straight at him like Lou did. "I was outside the whole time up until

five minutes ago…repairing the radiator…my wife put the little one to bed."

Ethan stops and shifts his feet. Wrinkles dig into his forehead. Once again, he lights up the street.

"There's no point in that, Eth," I hear Liam say next to me. "Lou's probably back by now and she'll be happy you were so worried."

Ethan takes a deep breath. "Hopefully." He smiles briefly, trying to cover his fear, unsuccessfully so. "Let's go the other way anyway," he suggests.

Liam sighs and puts what looks like chewing tobacco in his mouth. "Fine with me!"

Ethan nods at me and raises his hand in greeting. "Thanks for the help."

I smile my rehearsed smile. "Don't mention it."

When they're out of sight, I feel like I'm going to freak out. Agitated, I lean against the camper and dig out my cigarettes. *Ethan and Liam*. I inhale the smoke, trying to calm myself. I don't know why I'm so upset. I did everything right, didn't behave in a conspicuous manner or say anything treacherous.

Maybe it's simply a mix of fear and triumph that's getting to me. Or maybe it was the worry lines on Ethan's forehead. The fear he tried to hide with a smile because he was probably embarrassed to show it in front of me.

I'm stealing from him what he most loves and wants to protect. It would be better if I hadn't seen him and had been spared these consequences of the kidnapping. But I don't want to feel bad now. Not today, when I'm feeling good for the first time. I don't want to think about him walking around for hours, desperately shouting Lou's name throughout the night.

I chain smoke two cigarettes, then get back in and sit on the bench with my face in my hands. Ethan seemed agitated. He may be searching for Lou for another half hour, or he may just as well alert the rangers right away. If he has even the slightest suspicion that something terrible has happened to Lou, all vehicles may be checked

at the exit. It definitely takes me more than half an hour to drive down the hairpin bends to the park exit.

I know what that means. I'm getting sick as I walk to the back to Lou.

I should put her in the box under the bed. With a lot of luck, it would pass for a storage box if it was discovered at all. With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I pull up the covers of the bed and undo the dark paneling on the footboard. I set them aside quickly, then unlock the side wall of the wooden box.

I have to do it. It is necessary.

I carefully take Lou in my arms, get on my knees with her, and transport her into the wooden construction with her upper body bent. Seeing her lying there, so tiny and fragile, I feel like breaking in two.

Lou looks so helpless. So small in the dark.

So dark, Mom…

"Lou…I'm sorry…" My voice breaks.

I can do many things, but locking Lou in there is like turning myself into the monster I fear. Instinctively, I reach for the silver coin on my leather bracelet.

Breathe, Bren. Breathe. You are not him!

I focus on the cool coin between my fingers, it's all that I have left from my childhood. I've had it for as long as I can remember and it fills me with a vague memory of security. It is proof that there was a life before Thorson Ave. and that I had a mom at one point. In my dark prison, the coin was all I had. It reminded me of who I was and that I hadn't ceased to exist.

I press my lips together as I look back at Lou and shake my head defensively.

My mom left me, but Lou is here with me.

I have to do it. It won't be forever. I'll get her out as soon as I can. I let go of the coin and caress Lou's cheek as if that would make things better.

As so often before, I feel like I'm being split in two, like there's a wall inside me that I can pull up to block out all feelings. The

insensitive me grabs the lid with numb hands and carefully closes it. Then, I attach the panel and hang the coverlet over it.

Monster, the other me that was petting Lou whispers deep inside me. *Monster!*

As I drive past the visitor center, I see neither rangers nor Lou's brothers. After about a mile, I believe I see light in the forest coming from large spotlights because the beam of light is larger than that of flashlights. Possibly the first search party. I crawl along for the next half hour at the permitted twenty miles per hour, constantly afraid of suddenly being confronted by a large presence of policemen or park rangers. But nothing happens.

I drive up to the ranger station at the exit/entrance of the park. Luckily it's unmanned. The barrier is open, but that's not unusual at this time.

Not giving it another thought, I drive through the unmanned checkpoint, but I don't feel any relief yet. I tensely calculate how far I have to drive to escape undetected. Definitely to Fresno. In some curves, I can see the foothills of the mountains and make out the bright lights of the valley towns: Tulare, Visalia, and Reedley. They shine from below, above them a round, deathly pale moon. Spooky, but maybe it's only me. There's probably nothing worse out here than me. I've put the girl I love in a wooden box like a head of cattle.

An hour and a half later, I pass the Fresno town sign and most of the tension leaves me. In the industrial area, I search for a parking space in a half-torn-down warehouse and change license plates. I throw the fake California license plate on a pile of discarded electronic devices behind the no-trespassing sign and dispose of the lanterns in a glass container a few miles away. Then I check Lou's breathing and continue the journey along CA 41 N.

When I arrive in Merced, I can only vaguely remember driving there. The clock shows a quarter to twelve. About another hour and a half later, I stop at a *Flying J* behind Modesto. I properly park the

RV in a designated parking space, then walk back to Lou, undo the panel, and open the box. I lean a little under the bed. Lou lies still as if she were dead. With a shudder, I put my hand on her stomach—that touch is allowed. In general, all touches that serve her well-being are allowed. When I feel her breathing deep and regular under my fingers, the shivering in me subsides.

I leave the box open and the paneling off and climb out the side to get an idea of the situation.

The warm night air wafts over me along with the smell of exhaust fumes and gasoline.

The truck stop area is easy to survey. A yellow-and-red Denny's occupies a large part of the area and next to it is a gas station with a simple shop. Everything is flat all around, only a handful of widely spaced tin houses stand out against the dark horizon. It seems like nobody in the area cares about their neighbors. Perfect, actually.

A chrome-colored semitruck is parked next to me—a blonde pinup girl sticker is placed on the passenger door of the cab.

Tired, I lean against the front of the motorhome. I feel weird. The flat country and the leaning power poles with their sagging cables seem to me as if they belong in another, upside-down world. Everything is wrong. There are no snowy mountain peaks, no coniferous trees, and no green rivers. No Canada geese or wild sheep. No wolves.

The past two months in Los Angeles, the feeling of something not being right was less intense than it is right here in the Central Valley.

It must be Lou's fault.

Lou and I belong in the Yukon. Lou belongs in the Yukon. I never imagined her on the road, in Merced, Modesto, or anywhere else. In my fantasies, she was never in the box either. I never allowed myself to think about it even though I knew it would be necessary. Now I wish I had prepared better for this.

I smoke a cigarette and walk around the truck seemingly absent-minded. The curtains of the sleeping alcove are drawn. If I'm lucky, the driver is sound asleep and will remain unaware of my presence.

Back in the RV, I lie down on the floor in front of the open footboard of the double bed. The space is narrow, so I can only lie on my side, but I want to be near Lou.

According to the calculations I did based on her estimated weight, I need to give her the next dose of narcotics around 7 a.m. Also, I should put her on the toilet. I set the alarm on my watch for a quarter to seven, giving me enough time to prepare the mixture.

As I wait for sleep, I look at her profile and the long soft hair that flows like gold to the bottom of the box. I'm hyper and exhausted at the same time. I don't want to fall asleep, I just want to look at her. All the time, all the time. At this moment, I am the happiest person in the world. For a brief moment, it's like the boy in the dungeon is smiling inside me.

I set Lou on the bed and have her drink the mixture before she's fully awake. She murmurs unintelligible words between the individual sips. Once, she chokes and coughs horribly, so I pat her on the back and watch her carefully as she calms down. She tries to hold her head up, but her chin keeps dropping to her chest. At one point, she manages and looks at me a little enraptured.

"WhereamI?" She's trying to brush a strand of hair from her forehead, but halfway up, her arm drops weakly back onto the mattress.

I tuck the strand behind her ear, telling myself that it's for her own good because her hair will definitely tickle her.

"I took you to be with me forever," I say simply, letting my fingers rest on her hair for a moment. "I won't hurt you, Lou. Never, I swear."

She giggles like it's a joke.

The sound gets under my skin. It's a good thing she won't remember anything later. "Do you need to use the bathroom?"

"You-want-to-put-me-on-there?"

"Sure, where else?" I don't even wait for her answer, but carry her like a sack of flour over my shoulder into the tiny restroom. She

doesn't fight back. Inside, I set her on her feet and support her with one arm while I pull down her sweaty shorts.

I stare convulsively at her stomach and push the panties down her hips.

"Hey…" Her protest turns into a chuckle. She wants to hold on to me, but I push her onto the toilet seat.

"You're good to go!" I consider turning around, but I have to hold her or she'll fall off the toilet onto me. I support her shoulders, her head tilts forward, and her nose presses into my stomach. Shortly thereafter, a soft splashing sounds and I am grateful that these ugly methods also eliminate inhibitions. Otherwise, she wouldn't be willing to pee in front of me.

I stare at the wall, motionless.

"Done," she mumbles, turning her head so her cheek rests against my hoodie. The next moment, her arms close around my waist, powerless.

Her touch freezes me like a bronze statue. A chill runs through me, colder than ice.

You do not deserve this! You're just dirt! Just dirt and dust!

Lou snuggles her cheek against my stomach and her hands find my lower back.

I breathe against the guilty feeling that her innocent touch triggers in me. Something in me breaks open, and in the blink of an eye, everything dark within me grows even blacker.

I can't allow this, she's half naked, and when the drugs wear off, she's going to hate me. But her warmth is as good as it is bad, making everything worse at the same time. And the longer I feel it, the more I long for it. Something inside me softens, something that felt like steel before. Somewhere deep inside me is a place that needs to be held. In this way. Nothing more, that's enough. Why does it hurt so much? Maybe because I don't remember closeness because beatings were the only thing my body experienced and that's all I can give.

With the odd ache in my chest, I pull out of the embrace, dress Lou again, and carry her back to the bed.

After that, I have an iced coffee for a quick caffeine boost and grab a muffin from the cupboard before sitting on the edge of the bed next to her to watch her fall asleep. The confusion about my reactions remains and the tiny soft spot inside me is still there as if Lou's touch had grown new skin on a scarred area.

For the first time, I am scared.

What if she'll never forgive me for this? Not in a year, not in five? What if I can't avoid touching her? Or go berserk and hurt her? When the part of me I can't control hurts her? Then what?

CHAPTER 8

The third day with Lou is as calm and uneventful as the second. After leaving Spokane, I turn off the highway onto one of the nameless roads and cross the border into British Columbia, Canada. There are no manned border crossings in these lonely stretches of land, but I know there are hidden sensors and cameras on some interurban roads, even in dense forests or trails. To be on the safe side, I wear a baseball cap pulled low over my forehead and exchange license plates again after crossing the border.

I'm driving around the greater Vancouver area on a provincial highway. Nobody stops me, there are no controls, not even later on the interstates. It's almost too easy. I stop and check on Lou as often as I can. Most of the time I leave the flap open.

When I have to fill up shortly before Hazelton, the Canadian edition of the *Daily News* grabs my attention as I am ready to pay. I get hot and cold. A picture of Lou is emblazoned on the front page. I recognize it immediately: it's the photo that Avery took of Lou. She posted this snapshot way before my time, but I still recall what she wrote underneath it: *Thanks, Avy, for this great photo *beam*! You are the best!*

She was so proud of it, received over two hundred comments and even more likes. Seeing it on the front page now makes my stomach ache.

WHERE IS LOUISA?—the letters run along like a memorial under the picture. Next to it is written accusingly: *She only wanted to buy lanterns… Read the full report on page 3.*

I can't help it—I have to have this item, just to find out whether someone remembers me. So far I haven't dared search the Internet for reports of Lou's disappearance. Maybe a special task force is monitoring all the network connections that log on to these articles. It's highly unlikely, but not unheard of—and that's how they could locate me.

My voice sounds unnaturally loud when I ask for the *Daily News*. Luckily, there is a lot of activity and I have pulled my cap down over my face again.

Back in the camper, I lock the side door, check on Lou, and unfold the newspaper while still sitting on the bed. It too has a photo of her on the front page:

MISSING LOUISA STILL UNACCOUNTED FOR

I skim through the article with a pounding heart. Everything is described in such detail that for a moment, I think she's actually gone. In addition to the usual information, her brothers are mentioned. Jayden doesn't believe she's lost. The police think an accident is possible but cannot rule out a crime, nor that she ran away mainly because other campers overheard the argument about the lanterns. *Summer and Rain and their hippie dad*. There is no mention of a young, dark-haired man with a *Travel America* motorhome.

I lower the newspaper, relieved. Nobody remembers me, and if they do, they don't suspect me. Not even Ethan.

The thought of Lou's oldest brother triggers a queasy feeling in my chest. *Pretty…quite pretty…* How is he faring right now? The spark of a guilty conscience gnaws at my core, but I immediately push it away. He should have been more careful!

I take the liberty of leaving the lid of the box open and the bed paneling off and only hang the coverlet over the hole. Lou gets a lot

more oxygen that way and I can check on her faster. I think of the adrenaline shot I have with me for emergencies and pray I don't have to use it.

In the evening, I again lie down next to her in front of the box.

Eyes closed, she mumbles what may have been my name.

"What is it, Lou?" I ask softly.

She blinks a few times as if she can see better that way. "Whyisit-sotight?"

I look at her and repeat what I've been telling her over and over for the past few days: "Everything's fine, Lou. This is only for a short time. You'll be able to get out of there soon. You don't have to be afraid."

Noticing her shaking, I stroke her hair to calm her. "Everything's fine. You are with me now. I won't hurt you." I pull my hand back so it doesn't become too much.

"Oh." Her expression relaxes and her eyes, which have been blinking so frantically, close.

"Sleep well, sun girl," I whisper, my throat raw.

She looks so peaceful. She still doesn't know what I've done. I dread the moment when she finds out.

After Hazelton, I drive a bit along the green Skeena River, which meanders like an eel through the towering mountain ranges.

In Iskut, I stop at a tiny Western-theme gas station. A harsh wind bends the flat shrubs, rustles the leaves on the birches, and blows my hair in my face. I can already smell the typical smell of the north: strong pine needles, heavy wood, and damp earth. Here it's still mixed with sand and dust.

When I pay, I buy the latest issue of the *Daily News*. The cover photo features a gigantic aerial photograph of Sequoia National Park and Lou's photo no longer takes up the whole page but rather a quarter of it.

LANTERN GIRL STILL MISSING. RANGERS EXTEND SEARCH AREA IN NATIONAL PARK. DID SHE SUCCOMB TO AN ACCIDENT AT MORO ROCK?

The article is shorter and comes with a few photos of the granite colossus Moro Rock. Again, no evidence of a young man. I rip out the report and put it with the other one in the lockable compartment above the side door.

When I get Lou out of the crate that evening on a forest road, she is sweaty. Her hair is plastered to her head and her blouse is so wet I can wring it out.

"Oh, no, dammit, Lou!" I lay her on the bed and take her pulse, but I can barely find it, it's so weak. I quickly stuff some pillows under her feet to stabilize her circulation and fetch a small water bottle from the kitchen. She needs to drink more. I'll just double the amount of dimenhydrinate so she doesn't throw up.

Later, I give her a homeopathic dose of knockout drops, relieved when she dozes off without a second sleeping pill. Time to think of something new. There's no way I can give her any more sleeping pills when she is in this state or she might not wake up. I go outside and look through the sparse birch forest toward the highway. It's a lonely country road with little traffic.

Can I risk not giving her anything? Nobody suspects me and the police are not looking for a young man driving an RV.

In the morning, I could put an air-permeable cloth with a few drops of chloroform over her mouth and nose. By noon, I'll probably be at Dease Lake or Cassiar. The area is desolate and deserted. I could chain Lou in the back without giving her any more narcotics.

I nod like I have to reassure myself that it's a good idea, but my gut tells me otherwise.

Tomorrow, Lou will understand what I did. From tomorrow on, she will hate me.

CHAPTER 9

The next morning, Lou is doing better, but I still stick to my plan. I put her in the box and place a few drops of chloroform on a gauze bandage. It's thin enough to allow Lou to still breathe. I stop several times to check on her and I am relieved when I reach Dease Lake around two in the afternoon. I buy the current issue of the *Vancouver Sun* in a mom-and-pop store, glad to be able to even get my hands on a daily newspaper. Apparently, Lou is also the number one topic in Canada:

MISSING LANTERN GIRL: ARE THE BROTHERS TO BLAME?

"A shame," says the aged man behind the cash register in a troubled tone. I look up from the front page, which I've already skimmed.

"Excuse me?" I raise my eyebrows questioningly.

The corners of his mouth are drawn down like someone who experiences stomach pains, his eyes looking sadly at me.

"Now they say the girl fled from her brothers. But family is everything, isn't it?"

Maybe in Dease Lake, I think cynically. "You're probably right about that," I reply loudly. "I read the girl got lost."

The furrows in the old man's face deepen like ditches. "Did you see the picture of the girl?"

I nod mechanically. He may be old, but he's also a man. His eyes say it all. I know what he's thinking. Girls like that don't get lost,

they are stolen from the world. By men like me.

I murmur a brief salutation and get back on the road.

As I turn off the Cassiar Highway onto one of the *nameless roads*, I hear pounding from somewhere on the underside of the camper. At first I think it's the engine, but after a few seconds, I realize it can only be Lou. A moment later, I hear her scream.

She woke up too early! She's in the box! Alone in the dark.

I brake so hard, the tires squeal and the motorhome lurches a few yards uncontrollably over the bumpy road. My stomach clenches. Lou needs to get out of there before she loses her mind from fear.

I run to the back, take off the panel, and unlock the box. I'm struck at how quiet it suddenly is. The lid snaps down, I lean forward and see Lou. My heart wants to stop beating.

She lies on her side, eyes narrowed. Her body shakes violently like I have never seen before.

"Shh, quiet. I didn't have a choice." My words have no effect. She trembles even more, her teeth chattering uncontrollably.

It's imperative I explain everything to her, then I'm sure she'll calm down again.

"I'm going to get you out now," I say clearly so she can understand.

Her eyes widen as if I had announced her death sentence. For a moment, she looks me in the face. Confusion crosses her features. Confusion, realization, and bewilderment. For a split second, I wonder if she recognizes me and what exactly she remembers. Does she remember that I grabbed her from behind and drugged her?

I raise my hand carefully. "I'm not going to do anything to you, Louisa." I lean forward and grab her upper arms to pull her out. In the next moment, she starts screaming again. No words, just high shrill noises like an excited marten.

I pull back. "Lou, it's Brendan. We've been traveling together for the past five days. You probably don't remember, but you trusted me."

She slaps my arms, unable to stop screaming, growing worse and more hysterical.

"Calm down, Lou!" I almost have to yell to drown her out. She catches my thumb and bends it backward. The pain kindles my impatience. "Everything's fine. Dammit, calm down!" I grab her upper arm and clamp my fingers around it like a vise. Suddenly, she becomes rigid as if resigning herself to her fate.

Sometimes, pain is the only thing that helps. A disgusting thought out of nowhere! Her whimpers don't make it any better.

Being harsh will only scare her more, Brendan!

I ignore my concerns; she has to get out of the box and obviously that is only possible by force.

"I don't want to hurt you. Stop fighting me!"

I slip a hand under her hip and pull her out with a jerk. Only now do I realize how much her body still suffers from the drugs. Her muscles are completely limp. Standing over her, I roll her onto her stomach and pull her up on all fours, one arm above and one arm below her chest. Despite the situation, I can't help but feel a tingle run down my spine as I hold her and she squirms in my grip. I can feel her warm skin through the sweaty fabric, smell her sweat, the fleeting residue of Nivea lemon.

I'll never let you go, Lou.

I feel like shit. I *am* a shit! Can't I think of something normal in her presence?

A second later, she pukes on her hands. A green liquid spreads across the PVC floor. Without thinking, I hold her with one arm wrapped around her and bundle her long hair into a ponytail.

"That's from the chloroform. It won't last long."

She flinches and vomits again.

It's my fault for giving her those wretched drugs. On the other hand, it doesn't help any of us if I feel bad about it.

After a few minutes, she is even more exhausted than before and hangs in my grasp like a rag doll.

I clear my throat so she doesn't startle when I say something. "I'm going to put you on the bed now. That's all," I add quickly, feeling her flaccid muscles tighten.

With a single jerk, I pick her up and lower her onto the down comforter. As I look at her from above, my insides cramp. The

tingling on my back gives way to an uneasy feeling of fear.

Her cheeks are as white as snow and barely stand out against the flaxen hair. She turns her head in my direction without seeing me.

Stop being afraid! I want to scream, but can't get a sound out. She clutches the blanket with her hands, every muscle tense. Her petite body just continues to tremble. And on. And on.

"Do you need to use the bathroom?" I ask, mainly to say something normal.

She flinches again, shaking her head. At least it's a different reaction rather than screaming and trembling.

"Tell me when you do and I'll help you."

Hesitantly, her gaze wanders up to me and gets stuck on my face. Fear flickers like heat in her eyes. What does she remember? What does she still know and what has she forgotten?

I think of her hug, her cheek against my stomach, her arms around my waist. Everything in me contracts. There is a need within me that burns with an intensity that makes me dizzy. I want her so bad, my brain is in a haze.

At some point, I realize how intensely I am staring at her. I quickly look away. At least that's what you do with shy or wounded animals. And Lou simply reminds me of a wounded deer that can't escape.

"I've put you on the toilet a couple of times. Don't you remember?" I get back on topic to break the silence between us.

Another shake of the head, then she closes her eyes. Maybe she's not able to keep them open yet or she just doesn't want to look at me.

I take a step toward her and consider taking her pulse, but then she might start to hyperventilate.

Can one die of fear?

I wouldn't know. There were times I wish I could have.

I look down at Lou for a while, completely at a loss as to what to do to lessen her fear.

When I bump the covers, the down crackles and Lou opens her eyes wide again as if the sound were a harbinger of violence. "I'd

give you something to drink, but I can't for twenty-four hours after the anesthesia," I say awkwardly.

I look at her and she looks at me like I'm a five-headed alien about to perform horrific experiments on her. "It would be too dangerous," I continue. "You might pass out again and choke on your own vomit."

Her lips are trembling. She turns her head to the other side.

I take a deep breath and exhale through my nose. "Lou, I know you're probably scared, but I'm not going to hurt you. I promise."

She presses her dirty, wet fist to her mouth tightly. Again, she convulses. She's so miserable lying on this bed that it hurts to look at her.

I can't suppress a sigh. "Okay, I'll leave you be for now. You'll just have to see for yourself that I'm going to keep my word."

Silence.

Okay! So first, I need to find a place to rest for the night.

I'm almost at the cab when her voice stops me.

"Why me?" It's only a whisper, but it hits me with unbridled force.

What should I tell her? Because you're my Little Miss Sunshine? Because you made me smile? Because you saved my life on a day I wanted to die?

My heart is pounding hard in my chest. I could give her hundreds of reasons.

"Because you're so full of life," I simply say. It's the truth. A simple fact. Life gushes out of Lou like she's had too much of it.

For a moment, I am terrified and wonder if I can swallow up all her life like nature swallowed me up when it was only us. Maybe I'll suck up Lou and then there'll be nothing left of her.

I drive deeper and deeper into the forest on the unpaved road and simply park the RV alongside the ditch.

Briefly, I check on Lou, but she's dozed off again. That's probably best for her in the current situation. As I carefully take her pulse, I realize how long it's been since I've had a flash despite being

constantly under stress these past few days. It's probably thanks to Lou. Having her with me is good for me.

We're already far up north and the sun is still high even though it's already late afternoon. I sit cross-legged by the road, amid deep blue lupines, poppies, and feathery foxtail grass swaying silently in the wind.

I don't know what to do for Lou so she'll be less scared. In the past, I have never had contact with girls. At least not with the likes of Lou. Never has a girl or woman touched me as tenderly and innocently as she did when she wrapped her arms around me.

My gaze falls on a brimstone butterfly fluttering frantically around the lupine flower clusters. Lou is like that butterfly. I have to be careful not to crush her. To be honest, I don't even know how I would have acted toward her if she had volunteered to come with me. I have no idea how normal relationships work. In the slums, you had to abide by strict rules and hierarchies. With the monster anyway. And I don't recall anything of the time before that. It seems to me that since I was born, there has only been me and the man. I don't even know how long I was imprisoned with him, but it must have been at least eight years.

It is not until the age of three or four that a child has clear memories of what has happened. At least that's what the psychologist I saw about the flashes told me.

Lost in thought, I pluck at a few blades of grass.

The attacks came unexpectedly. Actually, at the time, I thought I was done with the past because the nightmares had stopped. I had started to partake in fights and finally found an outlet for my anger. Then came the first flash, which was short. The second, however, lasted several minutes. I experienced more and more and they lasted longer and longer. They became increasingly worse. In one particularly violent attack, I dove out of the second-floor window. The Bones were under the impression I was popping pills.

Since I was only 16 and had no guardian, I went to see a Mexican doctor who treated migrants with no health insurance. He referred me to his friend, Dr. Watts, a psychologist.

"The way you describe it, it sounds like a flashback," Dr. Watts shared at the time. She looked like a typical doctor, with a neat bun and horn-rimmed glasses, sitting in the middle of a cream-colored room—I was in the corner, a spot I had chosen myself. She was wearing a cornflower-blue suit—I, my new jeans and a decent black shirt. I had bought the clothes with the money I had earned from my first job. Finally, something that was mine, smelled like me, was clean, and wasn't torn. Yet, in her presence, I still felt like I was wearing my stinky gray clothes from Thorson Ave.

"A what?" I asked because I didn't know the word.

"A flashback is reliving a traumatic memory. Do you remember a traumatic event in your childhood, Brendan?" She spoke as softly and quietly as I had imagined a psychologist's voice would be.

I remained silent.

"You know trauma is an emotional injury that you fail to cope with. So far, we have not learned anything that works to deal with such a situation. There are states of extreme helplessness, a loss of control, which leads to questioning one's own understanding of the world. And of course also to a change of one's self-image."

Dr. Watts must have assumed I didn't know this, but that was not the case. I would have just expressed it with much simpler words.

"Sometimes a smell is enough to be catapulted back in time. Trauma knows no time. Because all possibilities of coping have failed, it is not stored in the brain as a past experience. So it's always present, in a state of limbo, and activated by a trigger as if it were happening again."

"So a trigger would be an odor?"

"A trigger can be anything, even a speck of dust on your boot if it's connected in some way to what happened." She thought for a moment. "It's unusual for you to have amnesia afterwards…meaning a lapse in memory from the time of the flashback. That would suggest a split personality, but it's too early to speculate."

"All I really want to know is when and how it will stop." That's all I was interested in.

"That's entirely up to you, Brendan. You have to try to work through the trauma and integrate it into your personality. Maybe

under hypnosis. That would be one of several possibilities."

"I can't do that." I'd rather be beaten with a bullwhip like a loser in a fight. I would never go back. Physically, mentally, or otherwise. The way Dr. Watts said trigger and trauma pissed me off, as if she knew about me and could see inside me. All the hatred and anger, the feeling of having to destroy something in order to be able to think at all. Sometimes, it felt as if all of my being was only anger. And then I felt nothing at all again like my soul had been evacuated. After escaping Thorson Ave, I thought every human would feel this way. It took me a long time to realize that I was the only one who somehow functioned differently.

"Why isn't it possible? What reason do you have for not trying it?" she asked after a moment of silence.

"I can't do it. Never." Maybe I raised my voice, I don't know.

She looked at me with omniscient X-ray vision. For a long time. For so long like only the man had ever looked at me. Not even one of my opponents, they would never have dared. But there she sat, looking me straight in the eye. And I felt smaller than her. Much smaller.

"Trauma isn't merely an emotional injury, it's always a loss, Brendan. It's the loss of innocence." She paused as the man had done when he wanted to add weight to his next words. I looked back as if I could bring her to her knees with my gaze, but she wouldn't back down. "Trauma is the loss of a life that could have been lived if the injury had not happened. In a way, you lost your life. You have become someone other than who you could have been."

"I don't care who I am today. It has to stop!"

"A pity."

"What's a pity?"

"That you don't want to find out who you are."

The words flutter past me. *You have become someone other than who you could have been*. Why am I thinking about that conversation right now? Is it because of Lou?

Of course it's because of Lou. I wouldn't have abducted her if I was someone else. But I can't turn back time. And if I could, to when? Was there a time in my life that would be perfect to start all over again? I have no idea. A lot was out of my control, but Lou, Lou is in my hands and now it can be perfect, it has to be.

A sudden gurgling in the RV's underbelly makes me sit up and take notice. I know what that means. Lou must have turned on one of the faucets. Presumably in the bathroom. I specifically told her to call me when she had to go to the bathroom!

Angry, I jump to my feet and in three big leaps I'm in the motorhome. I immediately glance at the bed: empty! From inside the bathroom, I hear a strange smacking noise that I can't make sense of. Is Lou trying to climb the walls?

Before I can stop myself, I rip open the door. What I see is beyond comprehension.

Lou is standing in front of the sink or rather some resemblance of the former Lou. Now her face is covered with blue soapy cream and white foam. She looks like the Smurf girl—only without the hat. Heavens, she can barely stand upright, yet she still got up! She could have hurt herself! The thought makes me angrier. She must listen to me! I have to make sure she listens to me.

"What are you doing there?" My voice is strained and I sound pissed off. *Great, Brendan, well done! Like that'll scare her less!*

She just looks at me wide-eyed. The foam is everywhere, even on her lids, eyebrows, and inside her nose. If she wanted to wash, she could have taken a shower and I would have helped her somehow. If need be, I would have given her a bucket to sit on. My help is probably not what she wants. Jesus Christ—I put her on the toilet, she hugged me!

The fresh smell of *Wild Ocean Dream* fills my nose. Suddenly, I see how wet her eyes are, as if they're about to overflow. Maybe she's thinking about her home. In here, it *smells* like her home. Suddenly, I feel like the biggest asshole.

Slowly, so she doesn't think I'm hitting her, I hold out my hand. "Give me the soap, Lou."

She barely flinches at her name. “Don’t call me Lou. You don’t know me,” she whispers shakily.

“Of course I do!” It slips so easily over my lips. And I do know her, though I am a stranger to her. I’m only realizing that now. I’m a total stranger to her. “Give me the soap, Louisa,” I repeat, but no less demandingly.

“No!” She clutches the soap to her chest as if she never wants to give it up.

No?

“I told you to call me if you wanted to use the bathroom,” I say sternly. “Did you drink any water?”

Defiantly, she shakes her head while spraying soapy foam on my boots. At least she listened to me on that one.

“Good!” That’s a start. I point to the faucet. “Wash that off!”

“No!”

I find this reply annoying, but somehow courageous. Mostly surprising. As if I wasn’t standing in front of the Lou I know, but a completely different girl. I carefully examine her from top to bottom, which is a bit difficult because the blue foam is all over her. I could grab her right now and put her in the shower to show her how her *no* fares to my *yes*. Then again, she is in dire need of some *Wild Ocean Dream* after these past five days.

“Okay, then stay that way!” I say, seemingly indifferent, and nod toward the bed. “Come on back! I suppose you’re done using the bathroom.”

She recoils and stays put. I’ve had enough. “We need to get going!” I grab her arm but she evades me, slips on the floor, and lands with her butt on the toilet.

“Going where?” She stares at me in fear.

I smile. Maybe because she realizes that her resistance isn’t going to work and that it feels good even when it shouldn’t.

“Further. Further away from where I picked you up.”

I take the soap from her and set it on top of the cupboard. Then, I grab her arm and pull her with me. This time she doesn’t resist and reminds me more of Lou in the photos. That’s good. Everything should be easy with her. Dealing with her should also be easy.

I stop in front of the bed.

She doesn't move, but I can feel a tremor running through her body and she stiffens up so I don't notice.

"Are you going to lock me in the box again?" A terrible terror lies in her whisper, as deep and as dark as the place I know. She looks up at me, wide-eyed, her whole face twisted in fear as if anticipating a punch or worse.

Suddenly, I know exactly how she feels as if her fear were a mirror of my soul.

For a fraction of a second, everything is there again. The tightness around me, the feeling of not being able to breathe, the sweaty shirt that made me cold, the pants that were wet for other reasons, the stench, and the disgust.

I don't flash, maybe because I'm looking at Lou and her fear is stronger than the power of my memory. Her eyes are still fearful and pleading, and I see myself looking at the man, fearful and pleading.

Mechanically, I shake my head. "The road will be empty enough that I can keep you out here. I only needed the box in the beginning." I release her upper arm and only now realize how tightly I was gripping it. Stiffly, I go to the window, push two slats of the blinds apart and peer out. "Unless, of course, you try to run away from me," I add quietly. It sounds like the menacing hiss of a whip, but the warning has to be there, even if I don't intend to act on it. I don't want Lou to be unnecessarily scared, but she must never, ever try to run away. She must not even dare think about it. She must know how dangerous it is to challenge me. Not the Brendan I normally am, but the part of me that acts during a flash.

After a while, I turn back to her. She's still standing in the same place as if not daring to move without my direction. Foam runs down her body and forms a puddle around her feet. When I see her, my tension instantly dissipates.

"We continue now," I say as kindly as I can. "You'll stay back here and lie down again."

She crawls awkwardly onto the bed without taking her eyes off me.

"And now?" she asks softly.

I go to the kitchenette in the front and retrieve two pairs of handcuffs and an iron chain from a secured closet. As I walk back with it, her eyes widen and I wonder how much longer this can go on.

"Nothing is going to happen." I nod to the brackets on the walls. "These are just so you don't do anything stupid while I'm driving." I clip the handcuffs to each end of the iron chain and snap one to the bracket on the wall. "Your wrist."

She presses her lips together.

I wait. I don't want to use force again. We look at each other. There's something in her eyes that startles me. I know it all too well: anger. Hurt pride, the will to hide it, and resignation because she knows how it will end.

"I don't want to hurt you."

Lou's lips remain pressed together as she offers me her arm. *But you are*, her eyes accuse me, and she's right, of course.

Where would I be today if I had become who I could have been? Lou would certainly not be here and where would I be?

I squeeze the cuff so it's snug enough but doesn't cut into her flesh. It snaps into place with a click. "Stay away from the blinds."

She nods imperceptibly.

"I'm serious, Louisa, do you understand?"

"What's not to understand about that?" she whispers. "You give an order, I have to obey."

"It's not quite like that," I concede.

She looks at her tied hand.

Yes, it is!

I know she thinks that. I do too. Anything else would be a lie.

CHAPTER 10

That evening, I almost make it to Johnsons Crossing, the place where I have to get off the highway to get to my property.

I park the camper on a forest path, grab a small bottle of water, and go to Lou in the sleeping area. She sits in the dark, huddled against the back wall.

"You didn't turn the light on," I state, nodding to the light switch just in case she didn't see it. "The chain's long enough."

She doesn't say anything, just stares straight ahead. I pretend not to notice her rejection and push my way past the bed toward the window. She immediately slides to the other side.

I suppress a sigh and pull the shade up. Moonlight floods the bed like a gush of silver water. "Brought you a drink." I hold the bottle out to her. "Just water for now, it's less likely to make you sick. That was how it was for me anyway."

"For you?"

She didn't mean to ask that, I can see it—I too thought for a long time if I should mention it at all. I smile. "I tested the chloroform on myself. I mean, I was trying to knock you out, not kill you."

She looks at me blankly like I'm even crazier than she ever imagined. She ignores the bottle in a way that looks strained.

"Water was always easier to keep down afterward."

"You did it more than once?" Her tone reflects what she really wants to say. *You're crazy, you freaking psycho!*

"Four times." I shrug with deliberate indifference. It was necessary, I did it, as I have done many things in my life out of necessity. Gather food from the garbage and sleep on the street in the pouring rain, hoping nobody stabs me in my sleep.

I take a step toward the bed and extend my arm further in her direction. "Drink!" I say somewhat impatient because she still doesn't reach for the bottle.

"If I don't, are you going to force it down my throat?" she hisses through clenched teeth.

Only now do I realize how desperately she clutches the iron chain. The ghostly bright moonlight breaks against her face and the soap residue makes it appear waxy. I pull back the water bottle. "If it helps keep you alive."

She closes her eyes and her hand holding the chain relaxes a little. What did I say just now that calmed her down?

"So I'm supposed to stay alive?"

Ah that! "Of course. What, you thought I would go through all this trouble just to kill you?"

"Maybe you're going to do it later."

"Or maybe never. Now drink!" I look down at her, not sure how to get her to do what is good for her. "Please," I finally bring myself to say and I am surprised at how it comes out of my mouth. I haven't asked for anything in years.

This tiny little word expands in space as if it has more power than chains and makes her open her eyes. Her gaze darts back and forth a few times. From me to the bottle, from the bottle to me.

"You first," she whispers harshly. That's when I understand she's afraid I might have added some other drug to it. Possibly knockout drops to make her compliant.

As if I need to! *Here in the wilderness, I wouldn't even have to sedate you, nobody would hear you anyway*.

Nevertheless, I shake the water and take a sip before I hand her the bottle.

Lou drinks hastily as if unsure when she will get more. After she has drunk half of it, I take the bottle away from her.

"That's enough." She looks up at me, her eyes bright with fever, she's still thirsty. "You can have more later," I promise quickly and nod to the door of the shower stall. "Do you want to shower?"

"No." She might as well have said *get lost*.

"It smells like a puma cage in here," I try to joke. I haven't done that in years either.

She looks down at herself furtively. "Don't care."

I sigh loudly. "You're still afraid I'm going to hurt you."

She pulls her legs up and wraps her arms protectively around her knees as if hiding from me. "Why else would I be here?" she whispers, avoiding my gaze.

"So that I don't lose you again," I answer honestly.

"You never had me. What makes you think you can lose me?" Lou blinks and rubs her hands over her bare knees. Again and again. It reminds me of something I did in the closet. Always the same movement. Back and forth, back and forth. A gentle, lonely rocking that comforted me.

I understand how upset she actually is. She just needs more time. So I shrug in a relaxed manner. "You're not all there yet. You're still out of it from the chloroform," I explain calmly. "And you're still way too afraid. Your head needs to be clear before we can talk about it."

She closes her eyes again as if she wants to block out everything around her. At least she stops rubbing her hands over her knees.

I step in place a few times, looking at her sitting there, huddled, a pathetic bundle of fear. "Tomorrow you can have some food."

No reaction.

The air between us grows thicker and thicker. It seems to me it is filled with Lou's panic, isolating her completely from me.

"I had to do it," I say abruptly, wanting to get through to her. "I didn't have a choice. There was no either/or. Never."

Little girl hearts.

Louisa Scriver.

404 Not found.

She doesn't move and, frustrated, I give up and take a shower.

As I rinse off the foam, the camper sways like a ship in thirty-foot waves.

I jump out of the shower, wrap the towel around my waist, and stagger against the glass wall of the cabin.

Hissing *damn!* I bump my elbow against it and go to Lou.

"The whole RV is rocking. What are you *doing*?" I bark at her.

She's sitting on the edge of the bed, hiding the handcuffed hand behind her back.

"Nothing." A whisper. Her breathing is staccato-like. Fine droplets of sweat run down her temples.

Nothing. *Of course, Lou, I believe you!*

I circle the bed. I know perfectly well what she was trying to do. What anybody would have done. "Forget it!" I nod to the bracket I've chained her to. "Not even I can tear the plates out."

"Did you try that too?" she snaps.

"Of course." I give her an appraising look, thinking about my flashes in L.A. "I think you'd need a cordless screwdriver and a ton of patience to get those things off." She can know it's utterly impossible for her. "And the handcuffs, forget it. Double lock. The trick with the needle or the paper clip won't work." I point to her necklace. "Or with one of those things."

She bites her lip and looks away. Caught! Of course she thought of it.

Anger rises within me. "You're not going to escape me, Lou. With or without the cuffs, you're not going anywhere. Get used to it!"

"Louisa," she whispers hoarsely. "My name is Louisa."

No, you're Lou to me, I think angrily. Just Lou. And for you, everything is somehow easy.

Yet that is not the case. On the contrary. She tries desperately to avoid my gaze and appears as if she's about to collapse under an invisible weight. But she doesn't cry. And yet it seems to me that I can feel the weight of her unshed tears on my chest.

I'm sorry, Lou, a voice whispers in my darkness. *I'm sorry, but I can't make it better for you. Giving you false hope wouldn't be fair. Because to hope is to suffer continuously. Hope is crueler than any other feeling in the world*.

Darkness flows out of me. One line at a time, I can't stop it. My eyes are closed as the black charcoal slides across the paper. Usually, there are delicate, quiet sounds, but today, the sounds are swallowed by the campfire. The crackle is like my inner burning.

Drawing has always calmed me. It started in the slums, when I first got my hands on a pencil and pad in Ramon's shack. We were hungry because the trash had yielded nothing to eat except a can of moldy dog food. Ramon lived in a corrugated metal shack with his aunt, who was rarely around. His mom had died and his dad was in jail as were his uncle and cousin.

That evening, I found the pencil and notepad on a broken side table, just thrown there as if neither item had any value. The pencil held a magical attraction for me as I had never done anything else with a pencil than to write or do math. I sat down and started. I drew the bird whose wings were broken by branches. The first try was perfect. It was as if I had never done anything else.

Ramon stood next to me and couldn't close his mouth. "Hey, Hoover," he said, because I forgot my real name at the time. "Can you also draw people?"

I shrugged; I had no idea. Then I drew him—with his fringe of matted hair and the face of Jesus. That evening, we knew what we could do to stay afloat over the next few weeks. We sold my drawings. They didn't bring in much, but it was enough for the essentials. Sometimes, I dared to go out and we sat on Hollywood Boulevard or Sunrise Avenue where I drew portraits and caricatures of tourists. It was a good summer until I happened to spot *him* on the street. After that, I didn't leave Compton for two years. I would have rather starved than go back to him.

A snapping of the undergrowth makes me look up from the paper, but when I look at the slender birch trunks, only darkness stares back. I sit for a while and watch the crackling flames of the fire.

I don't have to look at what's on the paper, it's always the same image. Rose tendrils on ebony so dark, an outsider would never recognize them. Sometimes, I feel better afterwards. Less angry, calmer, as if I could put my weight on a piece of paper. But that's

short-lived and today I'm not paying attention because I'm thinking about Lou the whole time.

I don't feel lighter, I feel heavier; guilty.

Because Lou no longer looks like Lou. No longer bright, no longer radiant. No longer light.

I knew the beginning would be difficult, even if I didn't want to think about it. I just didn't expect it to bother me so much. Somehow, I thought I could block out how she was doing until she got over the initial shock and recovered.

So what am I waiting for? Do I expect Lou to love me and we live like husband and wife here in the Yukon? That's how I imagined it, at least in my fantasies.

But what if she never wants me? I can't force her to love me. I have to think of *him*. The rare smile he gave me when I was particularly good at helping him sand and varnish the wood. I've been hungry for that smile. I would have given my soul for that smile. It was the only thing that gave my life meaning. It made me valuable for seconds, like he cared about me.

Perhaps the smile was even the cruelest. It gave me hope that one day he might change. But people don't change. At least not in the deepest core of their soul. A sadist is always a sadist, a loner is a loner, a bad person stays bad.

Will Lou feel the same about me one day? Will she hunger for my smile? For my words?

But I'm not him. I treat her well. I don't even want to chain her. And I will not punish her by putting her in the box.

Again, I stare into the orange-red flames. They hiss like snakes' mouths in the darkness, feeding on it, but they never manage to devour it. Eventually, the fire goes out, but the night is still black. Perhaps darkness is the basic principle of life and all good, bright people are like the stars in the firmament. They are born, they shine, and one day they die. But the darkness survives.

Lou is my star, my light in the dark.

When she gets used to me, one day she will love me. Suddenly, I'm certain of it. It's like a basic principle, even I would have loved the monster simply because I was alone.

Maybe it doesn’t matter why she loves me as long as she does love me at all.

In my mind, I see the image of the teddy bears swaying in the wind. Father, mother, child. The perfect family.

My chest burns with this hot, agonizing tug so strongly, it might burn me if I give in to it.

I want that, dammit! Exactly that.

Perhaps life is better with the illusion of love than without love at all. Maybe there is no difference between real love and the illusion of it.

When I wake up the next morning, the sun is shining through the long window of the bunk. The sky is a royal blue and the shadows of the birches fall narrow and long on the forest road. It must be early in the morning.

As I climb into the RV’s living room, I realize that today is my first day with Lou. The thought makes my stomach tingle like it did when she got out of the car in the parking lot at Sequoia National Park.

In order not to wake her, I refrain from using water and slip into dark green cargo pants and my favorite black shirt with the Jack Wolfskin logo across the chest. After that, I tie my hair in a ponytail since it keeps falling in my face. Maybe Lou can cut it for me sometime. Someday, when I no longer have to be afraid of her stabbing me with the scissors.

In the bathroom, I check my appearance again in the mirror cabinet. I’m satisfied actually—the wild, brooding aura is still there, but it’s less pronounced than in winter. For a moment, I smile at myself the way I want to smile at Lou, but it still feels like a grimace.

I go back outside and set the table as quietly as possible. Later, when Lou wakes up, I want her to feel at home, so I rummage through the closets for everything I bought her. Chocolate donuts, her beloved lemon cookies, and peanut butter.

After a while, I decide it’s late enough to fire up the generator to make coffee, but even that doesn’t wake Lou up. I assume the aftereffects of the drugs are still incapacitating her.

Almost silently, I step over to her bed. When she finally fell asleep last night, I disinfected and bandaged her wrist. The skin under the cuff was reddened from her attempt to free herself and in one place the skin was scraped. She lay there curled up like a young hedgehog, completely exhausted from the day and the drugs. She didn't even wake up when I put iodine on it. She spoke in her sleep; unfortunately, I didn't understand anything.

Now she is lying on her back. She has uncovered herself and the blonde hair is fanned out around her head. It looks inviting. I want to lie down with her and play with it. I don't know why I'm so fascinated by her hair, but maybe all men feel that way about hair.

For a while, I watch her sleep and, imperceptibly, remove the chain from her handcuffs so she doesn't feel so trapped when she wakes up.

Without further ado, I decide to make scrambled eggs with bacon; I know how much she loves that. Avery does this for all his siblings every Saturday morning. Its secret ingredient is crème fraiche. Lou once posted a video titled: *Avy-best-cook-ever!* Thank God I made a note of everything before Lou logged off Facebook, or else I might have forgotten.

I crack the eggs into a pan and put on another for the bacon. Avery-style scrambled eggs with bacon is a science in itself, but I practiced in Los Angeles: start by melting the butter, then add the eggs. Cook over medium heat, remove from heat as soon as firm and still moist, not dry. Keep stirring with a spatula. At the very end, add mineral water and crème fraiche. And salt and pepper, of course. Don't add salt beforehand or it will ruin the texture, or so Avery explained while Lou pointed the camera at the pan.

When I hear a noise from the back of the RV, I turn around. Through the half-open folding door, I see Lou climbing out of bed.

"Oh, you're awake!" I call out to her.

She flinches.

I try to ignore it, I'm just in too good a mood. "Breakfast will be ready in a minute."

"I have to pee." There is uncertainty in her voice.

I point to the bathroom with the cooking spoon. "You don't have to ask for my permission."

She stays in the bathroom for quite a long time, longer than anyone needs for anything, but I'm not getting impatient today, even if the scrambled eggs are getting cold. There's nothing she can do in there.

I put the pan on the table, lean against the kitchen counter, and look out the window. A few fir branches sway up and down in the wind, are calming and meditative, almost like drawing.

I mentally go through the route again and estimate how long it will take us to get to the leased property.

My land sits right in the heart of *Unorganized Canada*, areas rarely found on any public map. The occasional trapper shack can still be found there, but almost all are now empty since most of the gold mines have been long abandoned.

When the bathroom door opens, I look at Lou. For a moment, I am startled by the deep black circles under her eyes. They look like shiners after a fight; then again, I didn't expect her to be Miss Sunshine after five days in a semi-coma.

"Sit!" I point to the kitchen nook.

Lou's gaze darts past me and lingers on the side door.

She's thinking about escape, Brendan, all the time. Look out!

I watch as she walks to the table and flops down on the bench. Is she just pretending or is she still exhausted? Or is she apathetic?

Growing suspicious, I pour her coffee and hold it in front of her face so that she can see it too. "Coffee?"

She takes it and I take that as a gesture of concession.

"Black with two spoons of sugar." I squeeze onto the bench across from her. "I didn't know what you'd be hungry for, so I just made everything." For some dumbass reason I'm proud to know everything about her.

I lean back against the bench and feel Lou staring at me the whole time even though she thinks I don't notice. She hasn't touched anything apart from the coffee, maybe she doesn't dare. I think of our encounter at the visitor center when she seemed so shy. Perhaps this anxiety is a trait of hers.

Perhaps she just doesn't want to have breakfast with the psycho who holds her captive? Not inconceivable!

I quickly dismiss the thought. "You want some eggs?" I ask, deliberately cheerful.

She nods.

"Lemon cookies?"

She nods again.

Relieved that she wants to eat anything at all, I pile a mountain of scrambled eggs onto her plate. "Make sure to eat slowly and chew every bite or you won't be able to keep it down. And maybe no peanut butter yet, now that I think about it." It was stupid of me to put that greasy stuff in front of her. The bacon's greasy enough, she may not be able to keep it down. I push the glass away with the back of my hand, just to emphasize my words.

Lou peers down at her plate again, her hands on her lap. After a while, she starts to eat. Well, she tries, but her fingers tremble so much, the scrambled eggs keep falling off her fork.

Okay, I guess she still doesn't believe me.

I deliberately grab a donut and examine it more closely so she doesn't feel like I'm watching her.

Suddenly, she clumsily sets the fork on the plate. "How do you know what I like?" She stares at me accusingly.

Is she serious? "Don't you know?" Apparently, she's even more naïve than I thought.

"No!" she replies stubbornly.

"Think about it, then." I put the chocolate donut back and look straight at her.

"Were you spying on me? Sitting in the yard with binoculars watching us through the windows?"

"Nope. But I still know." I actually have to smile, although that's unfair. Sharing her life with the world, she honestly thinks someone would bother lying down in the field with binoculars. *No, no, Lou, you volunteered all this information yourself*.

She's still looking at me, suddenly her eyes narrow: "You followed me. When I was walking to the visitor center. You were tailing me in the woods, parallel to the gravel road."

I have no idea how she came up with this. “Possibly.” I don’t avoid her eyes since I have no reason to lie.

“You were the shadow,” she whispers, then covers her mouth with her hands for a moment. “Which was why you knew about me and Ethan fighting about the camping lanterns. You heard. You were listening.”

I hadn’t imagined breakfast would go this way. I look out the window and mechanically nod. I don’t want to lie to her. I kidnapped her, anyway, she knows something is wrong with me. She just can’t find out how much is actually wrong with me. At least not right away, or else she’ll freak out.

“You heard me tell him that I wanted to run away.”

I look at her again and smile briefly as I think back on it. “It was convenient, yeah. It could have turned out differently though. I’d been expecting a long wait, but you were easy to catch.” While it’s true, it sounds awful.

Lou promptly presses her hand to her stomach as if she were nauseous. “How long…was I unconscious?” she abruptly asks.

I shrug in a vague gesture. It doesn’t matter now anyway; it’s better she finds out right away and then gradually forgets about it. “About five days. But it wasn’t only chloroform, that would have been too dangerous.”

She swallows hard. “What else, then?”

“Atropine, dimenhydrinate, gamma-butyrolactone, barbiturates…”

“What?”

“Belladonna, knockout drops, sleeping pills…the dimenhydrinate was for the nausea. To keep you from puking.” I look her directly in the eye and see terror spreading across her face line by line.

“You gave me knockout drops?”

I can see what she’s thinking. “A small dose,” I concede. “Don’t you remember?” Stupid question, of course she doesn’t remember! But I remember. Her arms around my waist, her cheek against my stomach. “You woke up a couple of times,” I continue. “I explained everything to you and gave you some water. Not much, just a few sips at a time.”

“Why five days?” She still looks absolutely stunned.

I shrug. “The first part of the trip was dangerous. I couldn’t risk anyone searching the RV and finding you. That’s the only reason. And I knocked you out so you wouldn’t be scared in the box. On the last day, I gave you some more chloroform so I wouldn’t give you too much of the other stuff.”

She gets up and immediately flops back onto the seat. All color has left her face, which is as white as chalk now.

“There never were any bears on the path, were there?” Her voice is dripping with contempt, oozing out of her like water from a saturated sponge. “You preyed on my fears to lure me away. You… you’re…”

A nasty pig? A motherfucker? A bastard? A piece of shit? Spit it out, Lou, I’ve been called so many names!

“Think what you want of me, I’ll still keep you with me,” I snap back when she doesn’t say anything else.

She opens her mouth, her eyes suddenly shimmering with tears. “But…”

“You’re staying with me. Forever,” I cut her off. “There’s nothing you can do about it.” I tell myself I can ignore her disgust, but of course I can’t.

A tear escapes the corner of her eye and rolls thick and round down her cheek.

Shit! My gut clenches. She looks even cuter when she cries. *Shit! Shit! Shit!* But she shouldn’t cry. And she shouldn’t look at me like that!

I want to stick my head in the sand and not pull it out until she’s done. But she doesn’t stop. On the contrary.

I take a deep breath and focus on the me who is hard and cold, who can mercilessly drug and chain her without batting an eyelid. This part shakes his head. “Crying isn’t going to help you. Crying never helps. Not with me.” I feel strange. Far away. I look grimly out the window, concentrating on my old anger. “Where I grew up, it’s the law of the strongest and that’s me, not you. Sorry.”

Suddenly, I want to get out of here. When I’m almost at the door, I turn back to her. “I know how hard this is for you. I’ll do anything I can to make it more bearable.” Lou’s tears form two streaks down

her cheeks and drip onto the Avery-style scrambled eggs. "When you're angry, be angry. When you're sad, be sad. I'm not going to forbid you to have feelings. I can handle them until things get better. If you think you want to spit on me or whatever, then do it, but don't overdo it…" I pause for a moment, feeling my eyes drill into her and how vulnerable she is to it. "There's only one thing I absolutely forbid you from trying."

"What's that?" Just a whisper.

"Escaping." The word comes out hard like an icebreaker, much harder than I meant.

"What would happen?" Her eyes are wide open for me to fall into.

You're thinking about it, aren't you? All the time!

Just thinking she could run away from me upsets me to no end. Involuntarily, my hands clench. Lou grabs the butter knife—no explanation necessary.

"Just don't try," I say as calmly as I can, then storm out, slamming the door behind me.

I drain the gray water at the side of the road and fill the fresh water tank with several water cans. My reserves, in case we don't stop near a stream or lake.

I'm still beside myself. In the slums of Los Angeles, I saw so many people cry. Widowed mothers, starving children, even Ramon once when he thought I couldn't see him. So far, I've been immune to tears. They didn't touch me inside, as if my capacity for compassion had withered. But Lou's tears hit me in a way that upsets me. It's as if they can soften something hard the way water can round a stone. I feel helpless and vulnerable, yet it's her who's crying, who's helpless and vulnerable, not me. I hate feeling like this. It reminds me too much of my past. And that is dangerous because it reawakens things in me that are better left dormant. Locked away.

A little later, when I enter the RV again, Lou's still sitting at the table. I ask her a couple of times if she feels like doing the dishes to do something she's familiar with, but she declines. At some point, I turn on the TV and flip through the shows. Coming across a *missing person* announcement, I immediately click to the next channel in case it's about Lou. I have to think about the newspaper articles—I could use a current issue to keep up to date. Maybe I can pull over after Johnsons Crossing somewhere outside so Lou won't be the wiser.

"Do you want to see something in particular?" I ask her after I've channel surfed about a hundred soap operas.

"That *missing person* announcement!" she replies promptly.

"Except that!"

"How about *Hero of the Week*, then."

"You like that?" I'm learning something new about her. Properly taken aback, I click to the channel and start doing the dishes. I watched the show a few times in Los Angeles, or at least I tried, but it was that typical heroic kitsch that you can only endure for five minutes or you'll end up throwing up.

And Lou likes this? I glance over at her. She's glued to the screen and I'm glad to see she's distracted.

The banter of the moderator and the hero rushes past me, though my ears perk up when the moderator, David O'Dell, asks Andrew Franklin about his story.

"Okay, so tell the nation how you came across Henry Clark," the moderator asks the hero, Andrew.

I turn to the screen. This Andrew looks like a pompous ass-kisser with hair parted on one side and a grin like a prick. "Well, David, can I call you David?"

The inconspicuous moderator merely nods—for there's no time to reply as Andrew takes the floor:

"David, a few weeks ago I saw that picture in the paper." He looks intently into the camera for attention. "Some teenagers had assaulted a homeless man. Another photograph of a subway station and a literal whipping boy. I mean, we all know those pictures, don't

we, David? Not that I would describe myself as jaded, but it is what it is."

The account from this attention-seeking man sounds rehearsed. He probably practiced it in front of a mirror. Along with that permanent grin of his, he looks like a wide-mouthed frog that inhaled too much air. Irritated, I continue to listen because he is in rare form.

"Nobody knew the man and something made me want to look more closely. I mean really closely, David," he says earnestly. "God knows why. Anyway, I looked at him and I thought, wow, that old man literally looks just like a good friend of my father's. God rest his soul."

I look at Lou again. The thought of her liking this Andrew makes me want to stick my head in the toilet. Is she into Harvard students like him?

I glance back at the screen. Andrew is still doing his monologue.

"So I recognize him, but it's been so long that I have no idea what his name is."

"So what did you do?" David O'Dell asks.

Andrew doesn't look at David. "I started putting the word out on *Facebook* and *Do you know*? And eventually, I managed to find a friend of a friend of a friend, you know, the usual route, who was able to identify him."

"And now you're going to pay Henry Clark's rent for the rest of his life?"

"Absolutely, David. I mean, it's a matter of honor, isn't it? He and my father were both in the Marines."

"That is truly heroic."

I sneer, "Hah!" Lou flinches and half-turns to me. I point the dishcloth at the TV. "That Henry Clark guy is probably dying of lung cancer and only has two months to live. That Andrew guy is doing it just for attention." In the slums, we hated slick guys like that!

"Do you know him as well as you do me?" Lou asks, turning back to Andrew.

I ignore her comment. "You seriously think he gives a shit about the old man?" I stroll over to her, trying to be extra casual. She is

totally trusting, no mistaking that. "He wants people to think he's important. He's probably a mediocre student and thinks this will help him land a better job."

"Maybe he simply wants to help." Lou looks at me as if she doesn't know how far she can go before she starts to piss me off. That really pisses me off since I've already told her a hundred times that I wouldn't hurt her. And her way of defending that self-important asshole is driving me mad as hell.

"If he truly wants to help, he should let that lonely old man live with him, if he was actually his father's best friend." I give her a scathing look, then pick up the remote from the counter and turn off the television. Enough of this *Hero of the Week*!

"Go on, go to the back room! We're leaving in a minute," I instruct her.

She obeys immediately, which I'm thankful for. I follow her, still feeling the anger creating a lump in my throat. Lou can't possibly like a guy like Andrew! I realize I have no idea what guys she's into since there has never been one on Facebook.

"Sit on the bed…now scoot to the left." I grab her wrist and snap the loosely dangling handcuff onto the iron chain still attached to the clasp. A bit like a leash, but it has to be this way.

Once I'm done, I notice Lou watching me.

"Where are we headed?" she asks in a weak voice.

"Onward and upward."

"Onward where? You must have a destination."

"You won't like it, so why do you want to know?" I snap at her. In any case, *we're not heading to see Andrew*, I'd like to add sarcastically and feel like a little shit again.

She slides a little away from me. "Where are you taking me?"

She merely wants to know what you're up to, Brendan. That's only natural.

I go to the window and set the slats of the blind horizontally so that she can look out later. As my eyes fall on the unpaved country road, I feel a pressure on my chest that I can't explain.

I drugged and kidnapped her; she's scared, she's homesick, not to mention she doesn't know me. And I get upset simply because

she showed sympathy for a Harvard student.

"Away," is all I say. I'm at a loss for words and hate myself for it.

CHAPTER 11

I'm driving down the Alaska Highway toward Johnsons Crossing. The sky is still a bright blue with only a few small white ice crystal clouds weaving like threads across the sky. They often herald thunderstorms for that evening.

I don't hear a peep from Lou. As a precaution, I closed the folding door and wonder what would happen if the cops stopped me, but that thought is basically a joke. I've never been checked here and I've only seen a police vehicle once in all these years.

When I spot the ramshackle paddle steamer on the shores of Teslin Lake, I know I'm about to pass Johnsons Crossing. I need a newspaper, but I can't allow Lou to call out for help. On the other hand, Johnsons Crossing consists of only a few houses, so I drive over the bridge into town, right past the tiny grocery store where I bought a carton of Marlboro on the way to Los Angeles. About two hundred yards after the town sign, I park the RV on the side of the road.

"I have to fix something," I call back. "You'll get something to eat afterward."

Lou doesn't answer. Maybe she's still sleeping.

I lock everything up and jog back to humble *Mike's*, grab two sandwiches from the refrigerated counter, one with ham and cheese for Lou, of course, and head to the magazine rack. The selection is poor—there is only the *Yukon Quest*. I can't find anything about a

kidnapped girl on the front page, but I buy the issue anyway and hurry back.

As I climb the steps, it's still dead quiet inside the RV.

"Lou?"

No answer.

I unwrap the sandwich for Lou, put it on a plate, and pull open the folding door. The smell coming toward me needs…some getting used to. God, I swear, if she doesn't wash herself soon, I'll put her in the shower with her clothes on. When I look at her, I immediately regret the thought. She sits huddled on the bed, her head on her knees, and her arms wrapped around her bent legs.

"Hey, Lou, here's something to eat," I say quietly.

She doesn't even look up.

"You should eat something; you didn't touch anything this morning." I hold out the plate as if I'm hand-feeding a shy deer.

No reaction. Then she raises her head a tiny bit and looks up at me.

"Lou, I won't hurt you. Believe me."

Her eyes are pleading. Just like at the campground when she got into the RV, not yet knowing what was in store for her.

She is silent. She doesn't beg and she doesn't try to change my mind. Brave crosses my mind. *Or proud*. Maybe she is both. This time, this new realization feels warm inside me unlike the first time with the soap when I thought she was suddenly a different Lou.

Smiling, I set the plate in front of her on the bed. "Bon appetit."

I pull the door close, go up front, and sit at the table. While I'm eating, I leaf through the newspaper and finally spot a story in the middle of *Yukon Quest* about Lou's disappearance.

CANDLELIGHT VIGIL FOR LOUISA
In the case of missing sixteen-year-old Louisa, no new information has come to light.

What follows is a minimalist summary of what happened. Then there is only one more:

According to a report by the Daily News California, the four brothers of the missing girl are planning a candlelight vigil for their sister. It is scheduled to take place tonight at Lodgepole Campground in front of the visitor center where the girl was last seen. The brothers want to demonstrate against what they consider inadequate police work. Park ranger Thomas Baker expects a number of participants. The candlelight vigil begins at 7:00 p.m.

For a moment, I picture Ethan trying to smile away the worry. *Quite pretty*… Quite pretty is mine now. I quickly distract myself from the rising uneasy feeling in my stomach. I cut out the newspaper article and put it in the lockable cabinet above the door with the others.

In the evening, I leave Canol Road and continue down a former logging road.

After an hour and a half, I pull over on a graveled turnout, where I can also turn around tomorrow morning. The area is perfect. The spruce trees are so densely packed that hikers rarely stray into the area and none of the well-traveled trails are nearby. The turnout is large and secluded enough to build a campfire. Maybe this will distract Lou a bit.

I lock the two doors of the driver's cab and go back to her. For the first time, she doesn't recoil at the sight of me. I silently free her from the chain, but I don't take off the handcuffs just in case I have to fasten them quickly.

"I'm going to go build a fire. We can grill later if you want," I suggest.

She nods tentatively.

I breathe an inner sigh of relief. "If you like, you can come out and help me."

She looks down and shakes her head as hesitantly as she nodded.

I give her a quick look. Her hair hangs down in strands and looks more like that of a street mutt than flax. “You could shower.”

She nods again.

“But be careful with your wrist.”

She runs her finger over the bandage, lost in thought as if casually stroking a cat. I push past her and go to the narrow closet at the head of the bed.

“There are clothes in here for you. You’re an XS, right?” I had folded and stacked everything neatly and now I am truly excited to see what she has to say about the dresses. The white blouse she is wearing is also among them.

Lou looks past me, her mouth gaping and her eyes like spherical marbles. I can’t tell if she recognizes her own clothes—I’m not saying anything, it’s to surprise her.

I open the drawer in the lower part of the closet. “Socks and underwear are in here.” I point to the other side. “Shoes are over there.” Her gaze returns to me, and for the first time, I can’t read it.

“And up there is everything else you’ll need. Shampoo, shower gel…tampons and stuff.”

Her eyes bore into mine. That unsettles me. I’m sure she’s wondering how long I’ve been preparing for her kidnapping.

I think about explaining the whole thing to her, but don’t. She doesn’t have to know everything at the beginning since it might only increase her fears.

“Okay… I’m gonna get started on that fire,” I say instead since she remains silent.

I pause on the threshold of the corridor: “Towels are in the overhead cupboard.” I almost forgot.

Lou’s eyes follow me. Her whole body looks petrified.

Now what did I do wrong? I would like to ask her. Louder than normal. But I hold back and go outside.

I get a bundle of firewood from the rear storage compartment and search for a few rocks at the edge of the forest to use as a barrier for the firepit.

As I lay out the circle, I glance up at the sky. The white ice crystal clouds from midday have given way to billowing cloud towers

in the south. Their undersides are a stormy gray, hanging full of raindrops. Typical storm clouds. Still, I don't stop and build a fire out of thick spruce wood. Thunderstorms in the Yukon are unpredictable. It is quite possible there will be thunder and lightning in a few hours.

As I stack the logs, my thoughts return to Lou. You just have to get to know me first. If we spend more time together, soon, she won't be scared of me anymore. The fact that she wants to shower and barbecue with me is a start. She could have refused, unless she didn't dare.

Then something occurs to me. "Go ahead and pick out what you want to eat later," I call out loud enough for her to hear inside.

"Okay," she calls back after a few seconds. I glance over my shoulder at the RV. I can't see her, but she seems to be in the front area.

Didn't she want to take a shower? Why isn't she in the back at the closet looking for clothes and towels? Has she already discovered that I bought half her wardrobe?

Watch out! a voice in my head warns.

Is she searching the kitchen for a weapon?

I let go of the rough branch and remain still. "It's all in the fridge. Pick something out for me, too!"

"Okay!"

I listen but hear nothing. I pretend to continue working in case she's watching me. My senses are on high alert. But she won't find a weapon and it's unlikely she'll break my neck with a plate.

I keep working, but I can't banish the anxiety. From the east, cumulus clouds roll across the sky like dark gray avalanches. The layers of air thicken and the shadows blur with the twilight.

Watch out!

I look at the RV where everything is quiet. Cold air streams out of the forest sending goose bumps down my spine as if I sense something bad is about to happen.

And then I hear a dull thump.

It sounds like the impact of someone jumping from a low branch. I know immediately what that means.

CHAPTER 12

I leap to my feet and start running before I can really get traction. Gravel crackles under my boots, but the sound seems infinitely far away. As I round the RV, I see Lou scurrying across the street to the other side.

She climbed out of the passenger door window!

Something inside me goes completely nuts.

"Louisa!" Her name comes out of me like thunder. "Stop! Immediately! *Lou*!"

My field of vision begins to flicker and the trees at the edge of the forest blur into confused green patterns.

I jump toward her with a few long leaps. Lou staggers, recovers, and I can't stop in time. I smash into her with the full force of my body and the ground rushes toward us. My cheekbone slams into the back of her head, pain pulsing like an electric shock up my chin, and a bloodcurdling scream fills the air.

I barely realize I'm lying on top of her, pinning her to the ground with the weight of my body. My heart is pounding like a drum in my ears.

You have her. Everything is okay!

But in my head, a storm is raging, pushing that thought aside.

"What did I tell you!? What?" I yell at her. She is lying on her stomach. I raise up a bit above her, squeeze her arms with my knees against her flanks, and grab her neck. Hard. Way too hard.

She doesn't answer, just breathes in small, hectic gasps.

"I said no escaping!" I jerk her head up, gripping her neck tightly with my fingers. "I said no leaving me. Don't! Leave! Me!"

Stop, Brendan, stop! Immediately!

But I can't. I hear her gasp, feel her arms press against my knees, and squeeze my legs even tighter against her sides. I don't care if it hurts her. She wanted to run away! I told her not to try! I can hardly think. Red lightning flashes around me, and suddenly, I feel sick.

So dark, so dark… The childlike voice rises in me like a dead man from his tomb. *Mom, where are you?*

An icy shiver runs down my spine. I know I'm going to have an episode, it's like I can taste its harbingers in the air. Decay and moisture. In a panic, I release Lou's neck and pull her to her feet. I have no idea how much time I have left. I don't know anything at all, just that whatever I'm going to do, it has to be quick. As I drag her back to the RV, I fight my way through the fog. Lou scratches me, kicks my legs, and elbows me in the groin, but I feel nothing, only my hands gripping her like vise clamps. I won't let go of her, I'll never let her go again!

I stop in front of the motorhome. Suddenly, she is still. With a jerk, I turn her to me, crossing my arms across her chest—a position I had used in fights.

"Goddammit, Lou!" I gasp into her neck. "Do you want to get yourself killed?" I need to calm down. The surroundings are growing darker and it's not due to the upcoming storm.

She says something, but I don't hear her. So many words but none of them get through to me.

Blackness flickers before my eyes, the tornado in my head roars faster and faster. I need to get Lou to safety before I'm completely immersed in the blackout. That's the only thing I still understand.

I have to get her to safety. I repeat the sentence like a prayer. In spirit, maybe out loud, I don't know. It just can't slip away from me.

Suddenly, there is a flash of inspiration, a memory. *Chains! Handcuffs!* I need both. I'm dragging Lou back into the RV. I think I'm talking to her, but it's like a spark in a fire. I frantically tear open

a cupboard, sheets of paper fall to the floor. I feel for metal with my fingers. As I feel the cool links of the chains, something comes out of my mouth that sounds like a sigh of relief.

I pull Lou outside after me, hand on her arm. "Safe," I hear myself murmur. I walk along the RV like a sleepwalker finding the destination I didn't know I had.

"Stop…get down on the ground now." I push her down by the shoulder.

"Bren…"

So dark…

"You shouldn't have run…" Mechanically, I grab Lou's wrist and use the loose clamp to snap it to a steel ring on the underbody.

So terribly dark…

"Brendan…"

A veil falls in front of my eyes, I can hardly see anything. "Too late!" I choke out. "Getting darker…it's getting dark…"

Thunder rumbles in the clouds but I feel like it's inside me.

Confused, I look around. I wanted to do something… Lou is very small in front of me, her hands over her head as if to protect her from the rain…

Protection…yes…I run away from her toward the edge of the forest. Again, like in a trance, I find exactly what I'm looking for. A spruce, not too old, not too young, with a strong trunk that will hold me. I loop the chain around it once and click the metal bangles around my wrists, locking them into place.

Secure! Lou is safe!

This sudden realization brings me back to reality for a few seconds.

Did I just smile? I shake my head before I feel sweat running down my back like a flood. "Louisa?" I spot her sitting on the side of the RV, her face as white as it was a few days ago when she felt so bad from the drugs.

She looks at me and presses against the wall of the RV, shaking. I have to tell her, maybe not everything, but at least something to take away her greatest fear. I try with all my might to concentrate

on speaking, forcing the words into the right order before I say them.

"Whatever happens, don't be scared, nothing bad can happen to you." With brute force, I jerk at my bonds. "See?" *They're holding me! They must hold me!*

Her answer is lost in the chaos inside me. I feel something pulling me down, down, toward the boy. Panic surges through my veins. "Everything's dark!" I run toward Lou as if she can hold me so I don't fall. After several feet, a hard tug on the chain stops me and a sharp burning pain runs through my wrists like a butcher's knife.

I hear her voice again, but I don't get the meaning of the words as if she speaks another language.

"Lou!" I can barely see her. I blink frantically against the heavy veil in front of me. "Lou… Promise me something…" I put my hand in my pocket and, with shaky fingers, pull out the key ring. "But first, take this." I hold the key in front of me, hoping she can see it. "You have to take it." Otherwise, the monster can break free and I wouldn't even know it.

"How?" Her voice sounds distant and tinny, but at least I can make out what she's saying.

I reach out as far as I can in the bonds and toss the ring of keys in the direction of her words. "Keep it safe." I vaguely see a bright shape moving forward. Hands grabbing something.

I wipe the dripping sweat from my forehead with my forearm. "Now listen!" The feeling that the ground is going to give way and that I'm going to fall into the darkness grows stronger by the second. "The key only unlocks my handcuffs, not yours. I want you to…hide underneath the RV."

So dark, Mom, where are you? Mom?

The childlike voice comes from all sides. A red mist is suddenly between Lou and me. *Step aside!*

"What's wrong?" I hear Lou ask.

I breathe against the panic and put my hands on my thighs. "Hide under the RV," I blurt out quickly. "You should…be able to do that with the handcuffs on." Am I already gone? I don't know, but

speaking is becoming more and more strenuous, like shouting out of a well. I blink a few times and see Lou shake her head.

"Why should I hide?"

"Just do it! In the morning, you'll throw the key back to me. Understand? Tomorrow morning…not before!"

"Why? Brendan, what's wrong?"

I can't see anymore. A stone-cold horror wells up inside me, reaching for my consciousness like hands from a grave. "It's getting dark," I hear myself saying, "and when it gets dark, death comes."

Step by step, I walk backward away from Lou. "Keep the key safe, otherwise, we'll never get out of here." This occurs to me as the darkness pulls me down to a place my sanity can't access. I fall into an endless deep maelstrom like a black hole in space that swallows everything and leaves nothing. And yet there is more.

Images flash before me in the blackness, disjointed fragments of a kaleidoscope. Lou spinning in place, her hair blowing in the wind, showing sparks of light like a reflection from a thousand mirrors, sunlight refracted forever.

A part of me clings to it, and when I hit the ground with a hard smack, I feel like I'm still there. Inside me.

I straighten up, disturbed. Tree trunks paint themselves in the room without light. Who am I? Where am I? Am I in the forest or in the basement? I want to stretch out my hands, feel, but they no longer obey me, they don't belong to me.

One, two, three, four… I'm not really here anymore …

Someone's there, I'm not alone. Something comes out of me like a ghost.

Stay here!

It's the boy's voice. Suddenly, he's standing before me in his dirty pants and gray shirt. He's skinny like a prisoner of war, his eyes deep-set, revealing nothing. He looks at me, his gaze timeless as if he is not looking at me now but always has been.

You can't come with me, I hear him say without his lips moving. Then, he turns and walks into the darkness.

Wait! I call after him.

He turns to me. *You must stay* here. His voice is high like a child's but heavy with sadness. *It is too dangerous*…

And then he's gone…

CHAPTER 13

The boy is standing in front of the coffin, a coffin made for a child, for a very, very small child. The size is approximately for a six-year-old. But the boy is older than six, he can't say exactly how old because it's never his birthday. He's grown lately, his pants now reaching his ankles. If he grows another twenty inches, he'll be as tall as the man.

He's still staring at the coffin, not knowing what the man intends to do with it. It's also not as finely worked as the coffins that the man usually sells and that the boy has to polish and oil for hours—actually, it's a box. The boy knows nothing of family or love, but he knows he would never put his dead child in such a box that was so carelessly thrown together.

"Who's the coffin for, sir?" He lisps because his tongue is swollen. Every word stings his throat, which the man's hands wrapped around yesterday and choked him until he almost lost consciousness.

"Well, what do you think?" The monster grins at him.

The boy's stomach twists into a knot, he knows that grin. It promises danger.

"It's too small for me, sir," he dares to say.

The grin widens. "If I break your bones, how small do you think I could fold you up afterward?"

The boy shifts from one foot to the other, there isn't a muscle that doesn't hurt. The monster's fists spared no spot.

"But don't worry, you little shit, someone else will take your place in the coffin." The man leaves the workshop and opens the adjacent, high-pitched squeaking steel door.

The boy hears a whimper and a chill runs through his veins.

The man can't be serious. He only wants to scare him. He has already punished him for trying to escape. He's not seriously going to…but deep inside he knows what's going to happen. He knows it even before the man comes in with Blacky in his arms. Blacky's legs are oddly twisted and he's yelping and whimpering all the time…

The boy feels something pulling over him. A bell made of ice. Nothing can come close to him anymore. He wants to say something, but he can't get a word out.

The man throws Blacky on the table. Blacky has only been fully grown for a month, a small retriever mix. The man bought him for himself, but Blacky never loved him, only the boy, the bastard with no name and no age. Eventually, the man gave up and tormented the dog as much as he could, knowing it would hit the boy even harder. Now Blacky is lying there on the table next to the coffin with broken legs.

The man pulls a thick rope from his pocket. "If you cry, if you make a sound, I'll kill you. And that damn mutt will suffer even more. Maybe then I'll burn him alive." He bends Blacky's legs even further and ties his four paws together.

The boy is standing there. How is he to weep when the horror is so great it mutes him? How should he weep when his chest is so constricted that tears cannot come out?

The dog's whining is everywhere. Anywhere but under the bell that isolates the boy. He keeps swallowing, but he doesn't cry. Although he wants to. This time he truly wants to because then the man would finally kill him. What is he supposed to do without Blacky?

Yes, yesterday he still wanted to run away, but he would have come for Blacky at some point. He had promised him that. So he took the key. For the first time, the man forgot to lock away the key for the back door before the boy was locked in the closet. The boy pocketed it, and when the man was in the bathroom, he used it. He

unlocked it and ran through the yard. Running, running, he doesn't remember much more, he can't remember.

The man punches Blacky in the muzzle, yells for him to shut up. A thin thread of blood drips from Blacky's lips, but he no longer whines. He just looks at the boy, but the boy can't help him.

He will be alone again when Blacky is gone. It will be like before. His heart grows so heavy he feels like it's going to fall out of his body. No, the boy can't do it, he can't stand it. Help me! He cries silently, not knowing who is to come. But suddenly there is a glowing red fog inside him.

"Step aside," says a deep, unfamiliar voice. It comes out of the fog and the boy feels like he's being pushed out of himself and someone else is stepping in his place.

He's in the dark again. In this lonely silence of death. In a place without time. He could be in the coffin, he could be in the forest, he could be in the slums, he doesn't know. He wants to scream, but he is mute. He just listens.

Wasn't there something? Very quiet in the background? If he breathes shallowly, he can hear it. Yes, there is a voice. It somehow reminds him of the blue of bluebells. Of vastness, of the sky. He knows that voice; it whispers as if not wanting to wake him. He cannot move, but his mind follows the words. They are like wings that carry him to a better place. For a moment, he lets himself be carried away, forgets everything that was.

Coolness caresses my face. Birds are chirping all around me and a woodpecker is hammering somewhere. I blink a few times as if to focus my vision. The branch of a spruce bobs up and down in front of my face looking like a dark green fan. Dazed, I straighten up and try to wipe my eyes with my hand when raw pain shoots through my wrist.

Only then do I recall what happened: I had a flash and chained myself. But then it was twilight, now it's daylight. Early in the morning. My heart skips a beat.

What did I do with Lou?

Where is she?

Stiff, I get up and take a few steps toward the motorhome. Luckily, I spot Lou right away. She is not lying under the RV as I told her, but sitting against the side. She looks as awful as I feel. Frozen, wet, and neglected, but she seems fine otherwise.

I feel the kind of relief I felt back in the slums when I found something edible in the garbage. I want to call out to Lou, but then I realize I don't really know what happened last night. She ran away, I knocked her over, and grabbed her by the neck. I remember that, but after that I'm missing a few moments. I chained her up a short while later.

I watch her carefully, trying to figure out what I've done based on her behavior. I know absolutely nothing. There are still a few images of the boy in my head, nothing more…or is there? Wasn't this time somewhat different than usual? Was it because of Lou?

I walk quietly through the undergrowth to the graveled area, ignoring the biting burning under the handcuffs. I don't even want to imagine how tattered the skin underneath looks.

Meanwhile, Lou rummages in her pocket and pulls out the key for my handcuffs. Has she noticed I'm back to normal? Was I ever lucid last night? I don't think so because I pretty much always remember lucid phases during a flashback. And yet I have a memory. Something bright, clear, and vast like a streak of blue sky.

I watch Lou for a while as she tries to put the key in the lock. A smile creeps across my face. A genuine smile because that's so typical of her: trying in spite of knowing better. *Just like her attempt to escape!* The last thought erases the smile.

"I told you it only unlocks mine," I say before she breaks the key.

She barely flinches at the sound of my voice, but that's nothing new. When she looks up at me, her eyes are wary. "What happens if I give you the key?"

"I unlock our cuffs." I'm glad she didn't ask: *What happened last night?*

"And then?"

I can't help but smile again. "And then you should shower."

She looks down her mud-stained blouse to her dirt-caked feet. I notice even her face is covered with muddy brown specks. They look like big freckles, kind of cute.

When her gaze returns to me, something strange is reflected in it. Suddenly, I feel like a predator who is finally chained up where she can examine it safely.

"Are you going to punish me by putting me in the box?" she asks suddenly.

"Heavens no, Lou!" I exclaim, startled.

"But you threatened me with it!"

"I thought maybe locking you in there would be for the best if I… I mean, if that kind of thing happened." I raise my hands for show, the steel rings chafing my sore skin. Finally, I have an answer for her, even if it's a lie. I threatened her so she wouldn't try to escape and I wouldn't get a flash, but she doesn't need to know that.

She's still looking at me. "What are you going to do, then? You're going to do something, right?"

She already knows me too well. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't." I crouch down to eye level with her, hoping it takes away her fears. I study her for a few seconds, trying to figure out what's going on inside her, but I can't. "I don't remember what happened last night," I say honestly after a while.

She avoids my gaze, staring at her feet.

Apparently, she doesn't want to tell me either.

"Flashbacks, they're called. Reliving an old traumatic experience. Ever heard of them?"

She looks past me. "On TV," she whispers. "But I changed the channel."

I don't know if it would have been better if she had learned more, but from what I know about Lou, based on all her posts, things like that weren't important in her past life.

"There are different forms of flashbacks," I say, untangling a strand of hair that's stuck to my forehead. "Afterward, I never remember what I did. They start by everything turning black and white. Everything grows darker and seems like it's moving away from me." Lou is still looking past me. "Eventually, it's like I'm

trapped inside myself, I'm not aware of my surroundings anymore." I risk a glance at my wrists. It's worse than I feared. The wounds on the wrist on which I wear the braided leather bracelet with the coin aren't quite as bad. On the other, the skin hangs in tatters all around, strips I could peel off like a rabbit's fur. Underneath is raw meat riddled with bits of bark, pebbles, and dirt.

"Must have been a bad one," I say. "I tried to break free, didn't I?"

Lou nods, a look of terror in her eyes.

"Once during a flashback, I beat someone unconscious because I thought he was"—*a monster*—"someone else. That's why I chained myself up. I didn't want to hurt you."

Lou's eyes narrow to slits. "You never want to," she whispers tightly, "and yet you do. Constantly!" She blinks a few times and I know what she's trying to hide. Weakness and tears.

I stare at a spot on the ground in front of me. "I'm sorry, Lou."

"Then why do you do it?" she hisses.

I look up suddenly. "You just can't run away. There's no point anyway. I'll always catch you. The old cat-and-mouse game."

Lou's eyes fire bursts of angry bolts of lightning at me. Okay, the cat-and-mouse insinuation was unnecessary—who wants to be the mouse anyway. I suppress a sigh because I continue saying the wrong things and I can't help it. "There are a couple of things that bring this out in me," I return to the subject again. "We call them triggers."

Lou looks at me like I'm a cockroach she'd like to crush under the sole of her shoe. "Um, are there any others? Seems like something I ought to know."

"Yeah, but I don't want to talk about them," I snap. I hate the look she gives me. "Now give me the damn key."

"You sound so mad. I'm not giving it to you when you're this angry."

I let out an exasperated sigh. "You're still scared." It's more of a question.

She looks at me silently, her free hand clutching the key. The disapproving expression on her face gives way again to this pleading

that leaves me defenseless. She seems so tiny in front of the huge RV. A dull pressure fills my chest. I'm a pathetic idiot! Where do I get the idea I'm not scaring her? After all, she can't look inside me. And all this here is crazy: me, the wilderness, my flash.

"I could never do anything bad to you," I reply harshly. "What can I do that will make you believe me?"

"Let me go."

Her prompt reply makes me smile. "One–zero for you. But you know perfectly well that that's not going to happen. Now toss me the keys so that I can reach them."

"What if someone finds us here?" she snaps suddenly, jerking on the handcuff as if to beckon for help. "People are searching for me. Maybe the cops will fly over in a helicopter."

I think of the newspaper reports in the locked cupboard. "Maybe. Maybe not. The police believe you ran away. Same as hundreds of other teenagers every year. I don't think they're going to go to all the trouble of searching these deserted woods."

"You're lying!" she chokes out. "Of course they're looking for me. That's why you wouldn't let me watch *Find Me*."

"I'll let you listen to the news if you want. You're not in them anymore." *At least not in Canada*. "What do you think your friends told the cops?" I give her a piercing look. "Your brother's so strict, he doesn't let you do anything…you said yourself you wanted to take the bus home. Or somewhere else. Trust me, the police have better things to do than run around looking for a rebellious little teenage girl. Give me the key and I'll let you read the newspapers from the first couple of days after you disappeared."

Lou purses her lips and peers up at the *Travel America* sign. "That's blackmail. It's not fair. And you know it." Her voice sounds like she's about to cry.

Now I've hurt her again, that sucks. I take a step back. "I shouldn't have mentioned it. But you can go on waiting, of course. Until we're both too exhausted to move. Which will be quicker for you than me." Lou glances over at me, only to stare back at the *Travel America* sign. "This territory is almost 200,000 square miles and has a population of 30,000. Nobody's going to save you here."

She shouldn't have any hope. It's almost unthinkable that someone would come by here. Still, I need the key. Not that she falls apart in the end. If she faints from exhaustion, I can't help her.

For a moment, it appears like she's going to stay there, but then she apparently decides to come to her senses and scoots forward. As she stretches out the hand with the key in my direction, I can see how badly her fingers are shaking.

"You're really not going to put me in the box?" she asks in a shaky voice.

"Nope." I shake my head affirmatively.

"But you're going to do something else—you said that earlier!"

"True." I don't avoid her eyes. I want her to trust me so badly.

"What?"

I sigh loudly. "I won't lie to you. I hadn't planned on keeping you chained up permanently. But I suppose I'm going to have to for a while." That's a big part of the truth, after all. Obviously, I was hoping to be able to do without as soon as possible, at least during the day—I wanted to get by with the bell bracelets. There is no alternative during the night.

Lou slides back and leans her back against the RV. Lost in thought, she stares up at the light blue sky, her gaze following a few crows gliding over the moss-green treetops.

Does she honestly believe someone will come and save her? How bad does it feel for her to be here with me?

I think about how hard I knocked her over and how tight and unyielding my grip had been on her neck. At that moment, I didn't care if I hurt her because I was so angry. Even though it's buried deep inside me, I know what it feels like to be at the mercy of someone superior; being tied up, knowing the other could theoretically do anything to you. Anything. Truly everything. This time, I'm the superior one and that feels good. It gives me security. I'm okay, but what about Lou?

Thoughtfully, I look at her, but she's still sitting there staring at the sky.

I'm forcing her to live with me even though I can hardly stand it myself. How did my stepdad feel all the time I was locked up with

him? Did it give him satisfaction? And if so, why? Why didn't he put me in a home when my mom left? Did he need someone to torment? But I don't want to torment Lou. And she shouldn't be afraid of me either because otherwise, it won't work with us.

Restless, I sit on the ground, grab two stones, and let them circle each other in the palm of my hand. The chain tinkles a delicate melody as it scrapes the raw skin with every movement. It burns like fire as splinters and dirt eat deeper into the flesh, but the pain is good. It takes my mind off what I'm doing to Lou and if I'm going to let her suffer like the monster made me suffer.

I don't know how long I've been sitting like this. The sun burns my crown and back and my damp clothes dry in the heat.

Lou still doesn't move. I don't want to get angry again because every time I do, I ruin the progress I've made with her, yet I can't suppress my impatience.

If she does pass out, we have a problem.

During the course of the late morning, she lies down under the RV and I hear her mumbling numbers to herself. She may not even be aware she's talking to herself. I watch her for a while. She seems to be scratching something in the dried earth with her stick. It seems strange to me. She seems strange to me.

One time she looks at me from under the RV. Reproachful and discouraged. And a little pleading. At least that's how it seems to me, but how things seem is often not how things actually are. Besides, everything appears different to me today. Even my flashback seems different than usual, in retrospect. And I feel different. More real. More in my body. Not like I'm simply wandering through this life like a ghost.

The powder-blue sky thickens and changes color to a brilliant steel blue. As the sun climbs to its zenith, it gets sizzling hot and the air stands still as if a glass bell has been put over the area.

I pace up and down restlessly, kicking stones back and forth while doing the math on how much Lou has eaten and drunk over

the past few days. She's still under the RV and I feel my anger rising again because she refuses to use her head.

"If you're trying to provoke me," I call out to her at some point, "it's working."

"I'm waiting for someone to rescue me," she calls back.

"Not going to happen."

"We'll see about that," she insists defiantly.

"Yeah, we will."

Okay… Lou has perseverance. That's what I'm learning about her today. Despite last night, in which a thunderstorm must have raged without me being aware of it, during which I most likely freaked out, she serves me pushback. On the other hand, maybe she's merely desperate enough to cling to even the tiniest straw.

I disappear between the spruces because I need to pee and wonder if Lou might have to, too. At any rate, when she has to go to the bathroom, she will give up her resistance, I'm certain of that.

For the rest of the afternoon, I find myself a shady spot and sit down with my back against the trunk of a pine tree. With my eyes closed, I listen to the sounds of the forest: the gentle buzzing of the bees, the chirping of the birds, the rustling and crackling of the chipmunks in the undergrowth.

Finally, as the light begins to fade and the shadows lengthen, Lou crawls out from under the RV frozen stiff. She doesn't look at my face, but at my stomach. Without saying a word, she throws the key in my direction—much too high. I manage to catch it before it flies over my head and lands out of reach. Clumsily, I unlock the handcuffs and walk over to Lou.

When I see her, I don't know whether to shake her or hug her. She presses against the side, trembling, yanking at her bonds as if she wants to break free and flee.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I blurt out far too harshly. I'm starting to feel like a parrot. I crouch next to her and undo the handcuffs. Our bodies touch, but she sits still. In order not to scare her, I stand up extra slowly.

"Come on. You need to drink something." I grab her arm to help her up and she gasps in pain.

I let go immediately. "What's wrong?"

"I can do it myself!" she snaps. With one hand on the RV, she heaves herself up and clenches her teeth.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"No!" Lou crosses her arms defensively over her chest.

She couldn't be more obvious! Sternly, I grab her wrist. "I don't believe you. Let me see!"

"I banged my arm," she says too hastily. "It's not a big deal."

"Banged your arm, hm." I look her in the eye until she looks away and rolls up the sleeve of her blouse. "Oh, shit!" What I see terrifies me. There are two bruises on her upper arm as big and purple black as overripe eggplant. Basically, the whole arm is a single bruise, just in different stages. Her elbows are surrounded by a yellow wreath that must have come from the day of the kidnapping, with green, blue, and green-blue spots everywhere in between.

"Both arms?" I demand through clenched teeth, wondering how that matters.

She nods, but doesn't meet my eyes.

Anger wells up inside me, this time at myself. "It won't happen again!" I blurt out. "Never. You have my word, no matter what happens!"

She slips out of my grasp. "Don't make promises you can't keep." Trembling, she rolls down her sleeve before looking hard at my face. "But even then…" She shakes her head wildly. "Do you seriously think these bruises are worse than anything else you're doing to me? Trust me, you could beat the crap out of me, rape me, whatever, I wouldn't care as long as you dropped me off by the side of the road afterward."

I wince like she head-butted me in the stomach. Everything in me turns. I would like to grab her and press her against the RV, yelling that she's completely insane to even think such a thing. I clench my hands to release my anger. "You don't know what you're saying," I reply with an iron-cold calm. "You've lost your mind. Go

on, get inside.” I nod to the side door and this time she obeys immediately.

Lou first goes to the bathroom while I run water over my torn wrists at the sink. My gaze falls on the wide scar that is usually hidden by the leather strap. It goes once around the joint and looks like a burn. The monster didn’t give a damn if my skin tore, bled, or wept through the bonds. He also never switched sides like I do with Lou. A few times, he even made me dip my hand with raw flesh in a bucket of salt. I had to count to fifty, often more. Sometimes, when the weather changes or the seasons change, the scar tissue starts to sting. Then, I smell salt and blood in the air, hear myself counting, and feel the pressure of the suppressed screams in my lungs. The memory of the pain sickens me.

I quickly put the bracelet back on. Luckily, today’s fresh wounds are in a different spot.

I’ve just finished as Lou emerges from the bathroom.

“May I take a shower?” she asks, her voice monotonous as if she’s been alone for the past few years.

“Sure.” I shake my hands to let the water roll off. “Shall I get you your shampoo and shower gel?”

She grimaces like she’s about to burst into tears.

“You can also use my things,” I say quickly. I open the closet above me and pull out a brand-new black-pepper-and-mint-scented body wash and Irish shampoo. I hand it to her and she immediately retreats into the tiny shower room.

Maybe she’s afraid I’d only picked out shower gel for her that turns me on. I have no idea what’s going on in Lou’s head. After what she just threw at me, I don’t know anything anymore except that she strongly despises me. But that was to be expected. It simply takes time. I’ve always had to wait for the most important things in my life: for the lid to open, for escape, for food to be found, for fights, and for the healing of wounds afterward. Maybe that’s why I’m so impatient with everything else.

While the water is running in the shower, I gather the things I'll need for Lou later: Iodine, a pair of scissors, and the herbal ointment with rosemary. As I go to the mirrored cabinet in the bathroom to get Band-Aids and gauze bandages, I hear her sobbing.

Not just a little bit, but so violently and desperately that a cold hand closes around and squeezes my heart. I can't help it and stand close to the door—it's like a compulsion. I don't deserve anything else. I told her I could handle her feelings, but this is tough. She cries and cries like she can never stop, like she's choking on her big deep sobs.

I swallow. I would like to go in to her right now, but that would be the worst thing I could do. She doesn't want me, nothing of me.

When the pounding of the water suddenly stops, Lou immediately becomes dead quiet.

I turn to the water gauge behind me. The red lamp lights up. I silently walk a few feet away from the door. "You used all the water in the tank!" I shout loudly.

Silence. Moist, hot air seeps through the gap between the floor and the door. "Are you all right?"

Still silence. A bad feeling overcomes me. She couldn't have found razor blades, they're well hidden. "Louisa? Everything okay?" Has she passed out?

When she doesn't answer again, I throw the door open without giving a thought to the fact that she might be naked. She stands before me like a mummy, wrapped in a white towel but completely frozen. What can be seen of her skin glows scarlet, looking almost burned. I make a note in my head that I need to turn the water heater's maximum temperature down so she can't intentionally scald herself.

She walks past me far too ghostly, disappearing into the RV's bedroom and pushes the folding door shut behind her.

It takes an unbearable amount of self-control not to run after her to hug her, stroke her hair, and promise her that one day everything will be fine. I just know it. No one resists forever, and if you can't change the circumstances, you accept them as normal. You stop fighting.

I set out a tray with water and a bowl of oatmeal and wait another hour for her to calm down. Before going to her, I stir hot milk into the flakes.

"Lou?" I pull open the folding door with one hand.

She sits in the dark with the shades drawn, staring straight ahead, kind of at me, but actually sort of through me.

"Here, for you, something to eat." I set the tray down on the bed in front of her, then turn on the light.

She's wearing the black T-shirt and capri Levi's jeans. I chose both pieces independently of her clothes because I liked them so much. The wide neckline of the shirt reveals her delicate collarbones. They stand out, reminding me of two finely curved wings.

Lou's expression is still as if frozen.

"You have to eat something," I say after standing by the bed for a while, waiting.

Lou doesn't move. Sighing, I pull up the shades and slide open the window to let in some fresh air. It is already evening, but there is still quite some light. The clear whistle of a hermit thrush penetrates the RV, and in the background, the toc-toc-toc of a woodpecker sounds again. "I won't leave until the bowl is empty."

Apparently, the threat does its trick because Lou starts eating: spoon in the oatmeal, spoon in the mouth, swallow. And she repeats the movements like a robot. *Inanimate*.

Just as mechanically, she drinks the water I give her.

As I bandage her chafed wrists, her condition does not change. Listless, she lets everything happen to her, following my words like a marionette, completely without will. To be on the safe side, I press the ointment for bruises between her fingers so she doesn't feel like I'm using the injuries as an excuse to touch her. Like a sleepwalker, she rubs her arms absently like she's a million miles away. Finally, I tend the abrasions on her knees before putting the ointments back in the kitchen cupboard.

I realize I must chain her now even if everything inside me is against it. I hesitantly go back to her.

"Give me your left hand again."

She holds it out to me with a dull look.

I want to swear and bang my fists against the RV's paneling. *Goodness gracious, Lou! Scream at me again, cry, but do something! Please, do something!* Clenching my teeth, I untie the cuff and snap it around her ankle. "So your wrists can heal a bit." As soon as I've said it, I realize how horrible it sounded, like she's doomed to live with chains forever. With a sigh, I click the free ring of the handcuffs onto the iron chain that still hangs in its peg on the wall.

I actually wanted to leave her alone today, but when I leave, I have to think about her words again. "You weren't serious earlier, were you?" I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes at her.

She doesn't say anything, instead, she grips the fabric of the T-shirt and twists it into little sausages.

"That you wouldn't care if I raped you and beat you half to death if I would just drop you off by the side of the road afterward."

Maybe it's the harshness of her own words that brings her out of her rigid state, but suddenly she looks like she's present again.

I still don't get a real reaction.

I shake my head in resignation. "I really must be a monster."

She closes her eyes, avoiding my gaze. Her fingers clench the fabric of the shirt so tight her knuckles turn white.

"I merely want you with me. That's all… I won't touch you again…especially not in the way you think. Not as long as you don't want me to."

She doesn't move, breathing shallowly as if my words were a perfidious lie and I might attack her. I don't know what else to do to make her believe me. I recall the moment again where she was drugged and had wrapped her arms around me, and my dreams of her here in the Yukon. I still feel that dark deep burning in my chest, but it flickers less intensely.

"I'll wait until you're ready. I promise," I hear myself say and I've never meant anything more seriously.

Maybe it's the softness of my words that makes Lou look up.

"That's never going to happen," she says after a pause, her voice cracking. "Ever."

This time, she doesn't look away, yet it's like she's completely withdrawing from me as if I had never possessed her less than in this moment.

Maybe that's why I take a step toward her, to show her that it's impossible to escape me. Maybe I simply have a problem with her contempt.

I unfold my arms, which I had crossed, and hold my wrists in front of her, the torn skin and raw meat. "This time, you were lucky. I was able to chain myself up in time," I reply angrily. "I might not make it next time. So think carefully about if you want to try to run off again." I purposefully direct my gaze to the chain. "Assuming I ever give you a chance to try."

With that, I turn and march away. Her words sink deep inside me like an anchor: *That's never going to happen. Ever*.

Okay, Lou, we'll see about that!

I can't help it, I'm furious. I know how wrong it is and that I have no right to be angry. It is obvious that Lou hates me. But my feelings completely ignore that. I'd like to rage and scream and rip the steering wheel from the RV's column and throw it into the forest like a Frisbee, but then I recall how desperately Lou cried in the bathroom.

It's like there are worlds between the things I feel. I've never felt the difference so strongly—it's like a crack dividing me in half. *Good Bren, bad Bren*.

I go outside, slam the door behind me, and light a cigarette, but the nicotine doesn't soothe me. I walk a few yards into the woods and pound my fists on a lodgepole pine. The bark cracks, revealing the underlying layer of bast. My wrists explode in pain and start bleeding again.

I stop, my breathing ragged. I don't know which I prefer, pity or anger. Anger is wrong, pity is right. But anger doesn't go away just like that simply because my mind knows it's wrong to feel that way.

When I return to the RV, I don't know who I am or what I'm supposed to be like anymore.

CHAPTER 14

The further north we travel, the less there is left of Lou. As if she was gradually dissolving with the increasing distance. She only speaks to me when absolutely necessary. But what does *speak* even mean? *Yes* and *no* are the only words she has for me.

After three days, I reach the turn that leads to my land, a graveled, lumber-logging road that has long since served its purpose.

I hope Lou looks out the window from time to time so she sees a bit of nature. Now and again, the shady coniferous forest breaks open and reveals a view of the mirror-smooth mountain lakes. They shimmer glassy in the sunlight, the aspen trees on the banks soaring toward the sky like long limbs. Bright green valleys with wild rivers follow wide grasslands that are reclaimed by the dark forests. At some point, the trees move closer together and I can tell we'll be there soon.

Arriving on my land has never felt so good. *Lou, last stop, we're here!* I want to shout back to her, but I doubt she'll share my enthusiasm. I slam the RV door and walk a lap around the graveled bay as if I have to check if everything is still okay like with a house you return to after a long time. The white spruces still form a high circle around the clearing and seem motionless like sentinels. In

front of the spruces lies a dense green carpet of young willowherbs. A few bees buzz around the closed buds.

For a moment, I breathe in the fresh air scented with pine needles and look up at the visible patch of blue sky.

I spontaneously decide to bring Lou out here tonight. I left her alone for the past few days, but maybe that wasn't wise. These past two days, she has even stopped eating and she is losing more and more weight. Something has to happen.

Having dumped the gray and black water, I clear the pit for the campfire and gather wood and birch bark. When I'm finished, I go back to Lou.

She lies on the bed, hollow-cheeked and pale like she does every evening when I ask her if she wants to sit by the campfire with me. Somehow, she looks so surreal as if she no longer belongs in the real world anymore, only in mine.

"You must eat." My eyes fall on her collarbones, which protrude more than they did a week ago. "If you don't do it voluntarily, I'll force you." It would be awful to have to feed her food like a goose to be fattened, but I'm determined to go through with it.

But even my threat doesn't break her apathy. I carefully sit down next to her on the edge of the bed. She doesn't move, doesn't even blink.

"I always loved how full of life you are. It was like nothing could bring you down," I say softly.

Her eyes shimmer, but she continues staring at the ceiling.

"I know exactly how you feel right now. It's like you're lying in a glass coffin." I close my eyes for a moment, thinking about the day in the Yukon I wanted to die, all the days I wanted to die. "Dead but not buried. You can see and hear everything around you but everything is muted. The sky could be bright blue, but for you it's gray. When you reach out to touch something, all you feel is cold glass." I don't know who or what makes me find these words. No idea where they come from, but they seem to be touching

something inside of Lou. She turns her head and stares at me wide-eyed.

I force myself not to grab her hand. "I wish there was a way to make this more bearable for you. I wish I could be the one to shatter that glass for you, but I was the one who put it there."

Her stunned gaze burns into mine. I drop my head, wipe my face as if that takes all the blame away from me. Lying here, she's not the Ash Springs girl anymore. For the first time, I clearly realize that I am destroying her. Just as I feared at the beginning. My darkness is too much for her. She withers before my eyes like a plant without light.

"I should have taken a different girl and spared you," I hear myself say, and for a split second, I believe it. Then Lou would still be Lou. But the point is: there never was another girl who could have helped me out of my darkness, so there never was another option. And now we have to get through it somehow.

An hour later, I go back to her with a fully loaded tray. She is still lying there, laid out to rest. Inwardly, I steel myself against my reluctance to use brute force to make her eat.

"I made you some oatmeal with grated apples, anything else would probably hurt your stomach. And, Louisa, I'm not leaving until you finish it." Threats have worked before.

After a while, when she still doesn't move, I pull her up and tuck the covers behind her in case she's too weak to sit up.

I lean toward her so that my face is close to hers and glare at her with uncompromising hardness. "Eat!" I truly don't want to force her, but I see myself cradling her head in my arm, opening her jaw, and then holding it shut to make her swallow. The thought makes me miserable, although I've done it to her before, but at the time it was only water. For some reason that didn't bother me at all.

I rise and stand in front of the folding door with my legs apart and my arms crossed.

Lou doesn't look at me, but grabs the spoon stuck in the cereal as if in slow motion. Her fingers shake so much she can barely hold

it. Furtively, she withdraws her hand and tenses her shoulders, shrinking.

She won't eat!

Give her time, Brendan, don't freak out! She's not doing this to provoke you. She's simply afraid of you.

Without taking my eyes off her, I move to the other side of the bed and sit on the edge.

"We'll be staying here for a while, so you won't have to spend the whole day in the back room anymore," I say, trying to distract her from the tense situation.

She grabs the spoon again. It rattles against the edge a few times and she flinches. I pretend to look out the window, happy to hear her eating at some point.

After a few minutes, I turn to her and catch her looking slyly at me out of the corner of her eye. There's something new in the blue of her eyes, a tiny gleam, maybe a question.

Can I trust you?

You truly won't hurt me?

For a brief moment, I feel like my chest is full of confetti tickling me from the inside. My cheeks burn and I look at her hands. They're still trembling.

Since it grows dark late in the evening, I light the campfire and put on my old gun belt. It's more practical to hang your keys and wilderness paraphernalia on carabiners from the strap so you don't have to rummage around in your pockets all the time.

When I come back, Lou is still sitting on the bed exactly as I left her. Her pastel yellow blouse is rumpled and her blue jeans are far too loose.

"You're coming outside with me," I say so firmly that my words leave no doubt as to how serious I am. "What shoes do you want to wear? I have your sandals, Chucks, flip-flops…"

"Flip-flops."

"You'll be freezing in them."

"Doesn't matter."

"Okay, flip-flops it is." I shake my head, not understanding, and get her the flip-flops with stars on them and set them on the floor in front of the bed. "Put them on." I feel like a commander because I have to order her to do everything.

Lou slides off the bed with visible reluctance. She looks at the shoes, frowns, and gives me a strange look. Maybe she's wondering where I bought the flip-flops. They were hard to come by and required hours of research. In the end, I had to bid on it with a fake account on eBay for $78.

But Lou says nothing. It's strange that she doesn't comment on the clothes.

She slips into her shoes on shaky legs, one hand resting on the bed.

"Okay—now put that sweater on." I hand her a fluffy black sweater that I recently bought.

She reluctantly takes it from me and I take off the cuff so she can put it on. It's too big, but that doesn't matter, at least it keeps her nice and warm. I click the steel hoop back into place and study her closely. Her blonde hair looks even lighter compared to the dark sweater. It falls like sheets of soft, smooth silk and smells like my herbal shampoo. I like it when she smells like my stuff because it's more like we belong together. I stare at her, fighting the urge to touch her, to grab her hair, and pull her toward me. My pulse is beating in my fingertips.

It would be so easy, Brendan…you could push her back onto the bed right here, grab her hair…nobody's around to see…nobody…

I turn away from her abruptly and release the handcuff that is attached to the bracket at the end of the chain. I hate that voice in my head. Maybe it's something from my time on Thorson Ave, maybe the monster left a brand on my mind. It's like you can do anything with anyone you're superior to as long as you don't have to justify it to anyone. But I'm definitely never going to hurt Lou like that. Never! The voice can continue to entice and seduce me, it can talk until it is blue in the face, promising me everything. *Fuck it all!*

I stare at the necklace a little helplessly and consider if I should take Lou to the campfire like this. I could tie her to the chair, but the

thought of her sitting outside tied up like a dog while I'm free to roam strikes me as more inhuman than anything else I do. But loosening them, no, that's absolutely not possible! I can't monitor her all the time. Perhaps, despite her condition, she would risk a second escape attempt.

Undecided, I simply click one cuff around my wrist. If she has to be bound, at least it can be to me.

"Now we're tied together, you and I," I say, slightly smiling. "I can imagine worse things."

No reaction.

Slowly, so that she can keep up in her condition, I walk ahead and she follows me at the greatest possible distance. Ten feet, that's how long the chain is. I sit down on a camp chair in front of the fire and point to the one next to it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Lou take the chair and move it away from me until the chain is almost fully stretched. I suppress a sigh. The ring rubs my sore skin, but I remain seated without reducing the distance. After a few minutes, she perches on the edge, looking like she's about to storm off.

I peer into the blazing flames. Now and again, a log bursts in the heat and yellow-red sparks fly upwards. The wind whirls them through the night, and seconds later, they burn up as if they never existed.

"The night air will do you good," I say, breaking the silence after a while. "You look like a ghost."

Lou stretches her hands toward the flames, palms glowing brightly, but doesn't answer.

"Shh, be quiet for a second!"

Idiot, she is silence personified!

I lean toward her a little. The splashing of the waterfall can be heard like a blurred background noise.

Lou looks strained, maybe she's really listening.

"Water," I explain. I'm sure she heard it too. "Water is good, we can use it to fill up the tanks and stay independent for longer."

Her shoulders stiffen.

Sure, you don't want to be independent, that's obvious, Lou!

She holds her hands even closer to the fire, so close that she's about to burn herself. I swear I'll smack them away if she moves them any closer.

"You don't want to talk to me?"

Okay, good too. I dig out the storm lighter and the cigarettes. I won't let her spoil my good mood. Everything I want is here—I simply have to wait for Lou to stop resisting.

You are a bastard!

I know!

A few wolves begin to howl, deep, melancholy sounds penetrating the forest. It's not howling they use to locate themselves or demarcate their territory, but a call for lost conspecifics, to keep the family together. Like an acoustic beacon. It must be a pack of at least eight animals. Maybe it's even the group I saw on Quiet Lake in the winter. The howling grows darker, a little eerie.

Does it scare Lou?

I watch her as she peers into the darkness. The fire dyes her hair a red, sparkling gold. With her blue eyes, pale cheeks, and slim shoulders, she seems like a mysterious wood elf to me. *She looks more grown up*, I think. Maybe because she's lost so much weight.

"Why me?" she suddenly whispers.

Ah, so you can talk! I suppress a triumphant smile and hold her gaze. "Why not you?" I ask in return and inhale the cigarette smoke deeply into my lungs.

"You said you should have kidnapped another girl, right? So, I wasn't the only one you were considering? Did you have a list or something?"

So that's what is bothering her. I let the smoke out of my mouth. "I think you misunderstood."

Lou pulls her hands back as if she needs all the attention for the conversation now. "What is there to misunderstand?" she asks dismissively. "You stalked a few different girls and you finally picked me."

"I checked out a few different girls, but I never planned to kidnap one. Until I found you." I didn't phrase it quite correctly. I can't help but wonder if that wasn't more true. Was it my wish from the start

to bring Lou to the Yukon? Subconsciously? Would I have kidnapped her if she hadn't logged off? Sooner or later, maybe her posts would not have been enough for me. Somehow, that time is hidden in an impenetrable fog. As if I hadn't experienced it, but a different Bren had.

When I emerge from my thoughts, I notice how confused she looks at me. She shakes her head uncomprehendingly. "Found? Where did you find me?"

Oh, Lou…

"You'll have to figure that out for yourself. It's actually not too hard, if you think it through…" It's hard to believe that she doesn't have a clue, but I want her to figure it out on her own. Besides, I don't feel like explaining it to her. She'll think I'm even more deranged than I am. "Anyway…" I lean back and there's another tug on the chain. "There was never another option besides you. I saw you and wanted you. I was willing to do whatever had to be done. *Anything*." I pause and stare penetratingly into her wide eyes. "I know that sounds ridiculous, heartless, and frightening. And I'm not going to try and convince you that I'm a good person or anything." I look away and stare into the bright glow of the fire. "Because I'm not."

I say it out loud.

I'm not a good person.

That is what I was taught.

Too bad you don't want to find out who you truly are.

The sentence wanders through my thoughts as if it had been detached from my memory. Maybe telling Lou all this is wrong, but then again, she needs to finally trust me completely, and that includes the truth.

I wipe my forehead, which is hot from the heat of the fire. "I simply want you to understand why I had to do it."

"Well, I don't!" she spits at me.

Sure, Lou. I wouldn't understand it either. Some random psychopath comes along, lures you into his RV, and takes you with him. And now he even explains why and wants you to understand. That is sick. That's truly sick.

The louder my inner voice gets, the more I want her to at least understand why I need her. I think of the little boy who suffers over and over again. I'd love to tell her about him, but I can't.

Silence flickers between us, dense and unapproachable like fire, wailing like the howling of wolves.

Lou is still sitting on the edge of the chair, her hair like golden fire in front of her face so that all I can see is the tip of her nose.

I scoot forward a little to get a better look. "When you concentrate on your heartbeat, what do you feel?" I ask.

"My heart, what else?"

"Just try it." I curl up the corners of my mouth in a tight smile, ignoring her frosty tone.

"I don't want to."

I slip my hand under the leather jacket and put it on my chest. Heartbeats thud dully against my palm. But the nothing in between is louder. Darker. It sucks on me, pulls me down. It scares me, like I'm a child again locked in the dark confines waiting to die.

My fingers dig into the fabric of the hoodie. "All I feel is the space in between. Emptiness. Darkness," I say in a whisper.

"Which is why you kidnapped me?" Lou snaps, but it sounds less aggressive than before.

"Yeah," I answer honestly, trying to shake off the dark feeling. "It's not as bad with you here." *Even when you're sad and stubborn and hateful, I finally feel like I can get enough air. As if I can breathe again. Like an eagle that can soar over the strongest storms*.

She averts her eyes and gazes into the flames. "You said earlier that you would have done whatever needed to be done. To kidnap me, I mean." She hesitates for a moment, then looks back at me and I nod.

"Would you have killed one of my brothers to get to me?"

For a moment, I feel like she's kicked me in the temple. I can see why she's asking and it infuriates me. *Don't hurt her anymore!* I tell myself. *Not with words or with your hands*. I mentally count to ten and lean forward again.

"That's not a fair question, Louisa. There's no way to answer it." My voice is impersonal and much too calm. "If I say yes, you'll be

scared and you'll hate me more than ever. If I say no, you won't believe me. So, what do you want to hear?"

"The truth," she says defiantly.

Of course, Lou! Both make you despise me even more!

"The truth is that I've never even considered the question," I say after a moment's thought. "And you shouldn't either. I can't answer it after the fact." That's true too because I don't know what I would have actually done if Ethan had become suspicious at the time.

"You're making it easy on yourself." Her whisper is full of bitterness.

"I could have said no and risked you calling me a liar." I keep my eyes on her. Her hands grip the edge of the chair.

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

Something inside me turns icy. I abruptly stand up and turn away from Lou. Images of Jordan flash before me, lying on the floor with that unnaturally twisted neck. The silence of that time buzzes in my ears.

"Is that a *yes*?" I hear Lou ask in a squeaky voice. "So, you really…" She falters and swallows audibly. "I… I want to go inside."

I whip around to her. "No," I say with cold calmness. I see how scary it must be for her, but I can't let her suspicions go unanswered. "You asked me a question and I'm going to answer it!" I point to the chair. "Sit. Now!"

Face even paler than before with lips pressed together, she sinks back onto the edge.

"It was almost three years ago…" I pace in front of her. The chain rattles, rubbing my torn wrists, which I still haven't bandaged. "It wasn't how you imagine."

"What am I imagining?" Her voice is steady, but her body is shaking like aspen leaves in the autumn wind.

I stop, suppressing a mocking laugh. "The worst, of course. That I killed someone out of envy, greed, or rage. You're probably picturing how you think I did it. Something especially barbaric or underhanded I suppose!" I snort. I'm sure she thinks I stabbed someone in the back. I squint at her appraisingly. "Am I right?"

Lou avoids my gaze—*of course!* "How did you do it, then?"

At least she follows up. “It was an accident… It’s kind of a long story.”

“I only need the short version. And then I’d like to go back inside.”

“The short version is: we fought, he didn’t survive.”

Lou makes an indefinable sound. “You beat him to death.”

I could scream. “Don’t twist my words. There was a fight. We both knew what we were getting ourselves into. There were no rules and a whole lot of prize money.” *Too much, way too much!*

“So, you did kill for money,” she says, the corners of her mouth turning down in contempt.

I walk toward her with stiff steps. I would like to pull her up to me and shake her because she misunderstands everything. Because she has no idea about the past. Has no clue about anything! “I hit him and he fell down,” I blurt out. “He broke his damn neck! It wasn’t supposed to be a fight to death.”

Lou looks at me strangely like she knows more about me than I realize. “Maybe your punch is what killed him. How can you be sure?”

I rest my hands on the arms of her chair, leaning in close to her. So close that she turns her head to avoid me. I feel the warmth of her body, hear her rapid breathing. “Yeah, a lot of other people thought the same thing,” I say in a dangerous whisper next to her ear. “Especially the guy’s dad and brother.” *You’re not the only one who wishes me a slow, cruel death, Lou, don’t worry.*

Lou stays stock-still. “If there were no rules, it was an illegal fight and nobody looked into it. Lucky you,” she says in a trembling voice.

Brave. Brave and stupid.

I breathe into my stomach to control my anger. “Go ahead, keep needling me to see if I end up breaking my promise,” I say calmly. “You’re going to be disappointed though. I never hit people weaker than me even if they try to make me.”

“You kidnap them instead,” she manages to say.

With a sound between a sigh and a snort, I push off the backrest and give her a little more room again. I don’t know if I should be

happy that she's so different today. At least she's not so apathetic anymore.

"What are you going to do with me?" Lou looks up at me defiantly.

I click my tongue impatiently. "I've told you a million times, I'm taking you with me. That's all. You simply refuse to believe it."

With more verve than I would have given her credit for, she jumps to her feet and clenches her hands. "I do!" she whispers frostily. "I do refuse to believe you aren't planning to do something terrible to me. And you know what? I wish you would get on with it already, whatever it is. Do it now. Then, it'll be over and you won't have to keep up these nice-guy theatrics." She stares at me like I'm a wild animal.

"I'm. Not. Going. To. Hurt. You!" The dark tone of my voice sends a shiver down my spine.

"*Liar*!" She gets so close that I can see every detail of her face. Drops of sweat glisten on her forehead. "Why are you drawing it out? Because you enjoy watching me suffer! You really are sick. Sick and perverted."

Before I can understand why she's leaning forward, her warm spittle hits me square on the cheek. I'm immobile for a moment as I feel it running down my face. Anger burns in my veins. Lou clenches her teeth as if expecting a slap in the face. I don't know which of us is more shocked. I slowly raise my hand. She flinches as she stares at me. As if in slow motion, I wipe the spit away with the sleeve of my jacket.

"Come on!" she yells as if she can't take my inaction any longer. "Do it already!" She's shaking and trembling so badly, I look away. Of course, she's scared. Of course, she's pretending she doesn't care. And I know I have to do something. Something to help her—despite my anger. I think about the nasty voice in my head.

It would be so easy, Brendan…you could push her back onto the bed right here, grab her hair…

"Yeah." A dark whisper escapes my mouth. Lou staggers back a few steps. "Yeah, it's time. Something needs to happen."

With the rattling chain, I approach her and automatically pull the hunting knife out of the leather sheath.

Lou freezes as if she doesn't even dare breathe under my gaze. The red firelight flickers across her face. Stunned, she stares at the gleaming blade.

I have to do it quickly.

Without thinking, I jump toward her, grab her hair, and rigorously pull her back the few steps to the RV behind me.

"Bren…" My name is no more than a plea from her mouth, but I don't let anything get to me. I didn't want to touch her anymore, didn't want to hurt her anymore, but something has to be done. That's all I think about.

I push her hard against the RV, squeezing her between the wall and me like into a cage. My body presses against hers, wanting something different than my mind. She's so warm, so soft… *It would be so easy*… I can feel her butt against my thighs.

Lou starts whimpering like she can hear the voice inside me.

"Won't take long," I say extremely calm. I grab her head and press her forehead against the wall. "And if you hold still, it won't even hurt!" With grim determination, I pull her hair up into a ponytail, wrapping it around the edge of my hand as if it were a spool.

Lou doesn't move. Even when I tug harder, she remains motionless. When her hair forms a tight strand from the top of her head, I decide on a spot and start cutting. *Too short*, everything in me screams, but I keep going. Wielding the knife. Back and forth, back and forth. Lou's head bangs against the *Travel America*. The hair I've cut falls short and tousled. I could slap myself for what I'm doing, but it feels like a victory. Not for Lou, but more importantly, myself.

When I'm done, a strange relief comes over me. I turn, the ponytail in hand, and march toward the fire. Somewhere behind me, I hear the clink of the chain and feel a brief jerk. I wait for Lou to catch up and take the last three steps to the campfire. Then, I turn to her.

She stands there with eyes the size of two full moons, her face glistening with sweat. Hectic red spots run down her cheeks. She gapes at the blonde ponytail in my hand. Her tousled hair now reaches her chin with a few longer strands.

I nod stiffly, more to approve of my work.

"So, do you believe me now?" I toss her ponytail into the bed of the crackling fire with a flourish. There's a hissing sound, then flames descend upon it and handfuls of white and red sparks scatter into the night.

Lou steps next to me. The smoke thickens and the smell of singed hair fills the air.

"Do you think a man who was only interested in *that* would chop off the girl's hair?" I ask, staring at her with satisfaction.

She swallows, unable to take her eyes off her burning hair. It has curled and is partially white. There is a final flash of fire, after which almost everything has evaporated and burned. I turn away and, out of the corner of my eye, see her nervously tugging at the ends of her hair.

"Do you believe me now?" A hint of defiance darkens my words. I want an answer. I did this for her. And for the voice in my head that seems to think a girl's allure is measured by her hair.

Lou wraps her arms around herself, looking like she's trying to comfort herself. I probably did the wrong thing again.

"Do you believe me?" I ask again in a lower voice, gazing into the fire.

At some point, I feel her eyes on me and turn to her. Tears flow down her cheeks and drip down her chin to the ground.

"You're crying." I shake my head in surprise.

"Am not!" She wipes her eyes a few times with the back of her hand.

"Because of your hair? It'll grow back."

She breathes in and out deeply, opens and closes her fingers. She looks like she's struggling to regain control.

"Things couldn't go on the way they were. I need you to be less afraid somehow…well, I tried to anyway."

She doesn't look at me. "You made me think you were going to kill me."

"I told you I wasn't going to hurt you. All you had to do was trust me. It's not my fault. I wanted… I wanted to make the situation here clear, once and for all." I shrug, puzzled.

"So you did what had to be done. As is your nature."

A single laugh escapes me, but it comes across as completely out of place, lonely and lost. "I told you I'm not a good person. Good people do good things."

"And what do you do?"

I glance at the knife blade. The flames of the fire break on the reflective surface. I turn it slightly and see part of my face. Soot sticks to my chin and the scratch on my forehead, left by Lou, is glowing scarlet.

Too bad you don't want to know who you are.

I push the voice away and put the hunting knife back in its leather sheath.

"Today, I cut hair. Tomorrow, I'll build rabbit traps. The day after tomorrow, I'll tell you where I found you—if you haven't figured it out by then. Would that be a start?" I force a smile even though I don't feel like it.

Lou backs away from me toward the spruces until the chain tightens. She doesn't say anything else, instead looks at the RV, the forest, and then back to me. As if she doesn't know what to do with herself and her thoughts.

I can't stop looking at her. The shorter hair makes her appear younger, but her eyes are dull. Something in me pushes to the surface. A feeling, a knowledge that is still wordless and unformed. Lou doesn't feel any safer with me, but seems completely lost. She is miles away from the girl who obliviously twirled in the evening light. She's not the girl in my photos anymore.

I recall Dr. Watts' explanation to me from years ago.

A trauma is always the loss of innocence. Trauma is the loss of a life that could have been lived if the injury had not happened.

All of a sudden I feel sick. It's me who took the life she could have lived.

The innocence in her eyes, her vitality, her trusting nature—I shook her worldview by revealing what a wicked place this earth can be. She'll never be the Lou I wanted to kidnap. My *Little Miss Sunshine* who the little boy was clinging to is gone forever.

Suddenly, I can't bear the sight of her anymore and turn away. I clutch the silver coin on my bracelet tightly. I told myself I was better than my stepfather because I didn't abuse Lou for base reasons, but that was a lie. Of course I mistreat her. Of course I torment her. She's only here to make me feel better.

I take a few deep breaths, fighting back the burning urge to throw up. If I were a good person, I would let her go. Maybe then she would still have a chance to see the world the way it was before that day. But I cannot. Something inside me won't let me finish that thought. I can't let her go. Never again. Not ever.

I glance at her furtively. She is completely lost, a small, light shadow against the tall dark conifers. Entirely different from what I imagined. I shake my head. I'm most definitely not a good person. Good people do good things. Things I can't do.

CHAPTER 15

The darkness surrounds me like an oversized shadow, its invisible weight pressing on my shoulders, weighing down my steps. I wander with numb feet across the icy ground. I can't find my way back. I have forgotten where I came from. Who I was can only be sensed in the echoes of the blackness like a distant odor.

Suddenly, I hit a hard surface with my outstretched hands and, with sleepwalking certainty, I know immediately that it's a door. I run my fingertips over the surface. Rose tendrils on ebony like on the coffin. My fingers find the cool metal of the handle. Closed.

You can't come in, I hear the boy whisper from the next room.

Why not? I ask.

You can't take it. He's directly behind the door.

For a moment, it's like I know this boy well.

You are too small. I put my fingers on the rose tendrils.

Not back then.

What does he mean? I yank my hand back in surprise and within the blink of an eye, where the door used to be, there is the veil of silence and darkness.

Unsteadily, I walk a few steps and suddenly notice that the boy is walking next to me. He wears blue jeans, a white shirt, and polished shoes. He keeps staring at me, and while I'm wondering why I can see him despite the blackness, he points straight ahead.

You have to go a long way.

I want to ask him how he knows that, but then he's gone again. I blink and look ahead, and all of a sudden, the darkness breaks in front of me like the skin of a fruit.

Something blue drifts through my dream. A blue like bluebells. It flutters around the edges like a piece of sky has been cut out. Without thinking, I reach for it and I immediately feel the pull on my body as if I was being swept along by a wind and carried away. All around me is a soft whisper, incomprehensible words like tender hands caressing my skin. They envelop me like a hug, hold me tight. The next time I blink, a narrow strip of light falls on me like a door opening. It is dazzlingly bright behind it and Lou is standing in the light.

Heart pounding, I pull up and hit my head hard on the RV's roof. I rub the painful area briefly, then I climb over the backrest of the dining bench onto the floor and creep backward.

Lou is curled up again like a vulnerable animal, her handcuffed arm stretched out from under the covers.

Something crackles hot and cold in my chest. I feel defenseless when I see her as if she has the power to break down the door inside me. A tenderness I've never known overwhelms me. I can't believe she did this for me. I remember the voice that reached me during the flash.

You talked to me, Lou, right? That night I had the blackout, you sat by the RV and talked to me. You comforted me, and no matter what you told me, it helped me. And you did that even though… I am who I am.

I listen to her breathing, but it sounds labored as if it is too difficult.

I'm sorry I'm not a better person, Lou. I wish I could be that for you, but I can't.

She stops breathing for a moment, rolling over in her sleep, chin-length hair falling across her cheek.

I can't stop looking at her. This time, there isn't the deep dark burning in my chest. There is something different, but I can't

describe it. I try to trace the feeling like the injuries after a fight, but it seems nobody ever taught me the right words to describe it. It feels like stepping out of a dusty cave into a valley of fresh green trees and a crystal clear lake. The feeling is extensive, vast, and slight. It tickles as if wind, sun, and shadows were chasing each other across my bare skin.

Maybe it’s just northern-sky blue.

CHAPTER 16

I glance out the bunk window. Judging by the low position of the sun, it's only six o'clock in the morning.

I quickly climb down, turn on the generator, and put on the coffee. Then, I go back to Lou. She's still curled up like she was the night before, her handcuffed arm stretched out toward the tie-up.

Reluctantly, I knock on the wall three times to wake her up. She is used to this now and is no longer frightened.

"Good morning." I reach for the cuff hanging from the iron chain and unlock it.

Her swollen eyes blink at me, but she doesn't reply. Perhaps she cried in her sleep; if so, I didn't hear it.

"After breakfast, I'll show you how to build a rabbit trap," I say cheerfully.

"I don't eat rabbits." Lou peels off the covers, pulls her top down by the hem, and immediately disappears into the bathroom.

"You might have to one day," I call after her, extra loud. "When the supply of food runs out, for example."

Bang—the door flies shut behind her.

For a moment, I don't know whether to laugh or get angry.

"Oh, right, I nearly forgot you're on a hunger strike," is all I say as I go back to the front.

Thinking about what to make her to eat, I decide on Eggo thick and fluffy waffles, which she often toasted with Emma.

Love them so much, Lou once wrote in a post about it.

When she emerges from the bathroom, she has her hair tied back with gauze bandaging.

"You looked in the cabinet," I say, surprised.

"Is that a problem?" There's a look of rebellion in her eyes.

"No." I smile disarmingly. She won't find any tools in the cupboard, I have all of them in the storage space below and in my lockable cupboard above the door. I stocked up a bit, but only with harmless things like aspirin, cough syrup, bandages, and tape. She can't kill herself, or me, with those.

Lou disappears into her area and pulls the folding door shut behind her. Shortly thereafter, the motorhome rocks because she is probably standing on the bed rummaging around in the middle closet, and then I hear a door slam.

Then, nothing happens for a few minutes.

"Are you coming or what?" I call out as I pop the last two waffles into the toaster.

She doesn't reply, but shortly after my question, the folding door opens. Lou comes forward with stiff steps and sits down on the bench.

Without comment, I click the loose handcuff from her wrist onto the chain I attached to the anchor under the table earlier.

Lou's gaze follows the links to under the tabletop. Her expression remains impassive as if it weren't she who was chained. Or as if she had accepted this condition.

The scar tissue beneath my braided leather bracelet stings. I shake off a cold shudder and pour her coffee, add two sugars, and place the cup on the table in front of her.

With thin lips, she glances at the plate on which I have stacked the waffles.

"Want some blueberry pancakes?" I ask as I retrieve the powdered sugar and a sieve from the cupboard.

"No."

"Okay." The last two waffles pop out of the toaster. Using two fingers, I pull them out and place them on the serving plate, dusting the waffle mountain with powdered sugar.

I squeeze myself onto the bench across from Lou and place the plate between us. Lou sits there like a statue as if none of this concerns her. I study her for a while. There are still bags under her eyes and her skin is creamy white, which is accentuated by her coral blouse. My gaze falls on the two strands of hair that fall across her cheeks like a light frame on the left and right. They soften her oval face even more. I remember last night, the strange feeling while I watched her sleep. I want to say something nice to her, cheer her up. "You look cute with your hair up."

Her hands clench and coffee sloshes out of the cup.

Well done, Brendan! Very sensitive! "Sorry." I'm annoyed with myself. "Shouldn't have said that." I quickly wipe up the coffee with a kitchen towel and grab a waffle from the plate.

"You need to eat," I say a few minutes later with my mouth full to Lou, who once again doesn't touch anything.

"I'm not hungry." She stares at the waffle in my hand, and for a moment, it seems as if her face is turning green.

"I believe it." I nod. "But you still have to eat."

"Are you going to force me?" Almost imperceptibly, she slides back a little. The faux leather of the seat creaks.

"I'd find a way to get you to eat, trust me."

Lou hunches her shoulders, which makes her appear small again. "I really do feel sick." She looks at me, this time openly and a little pleadingly.

I glance from her to the waffles and back to her face. I can't suppress a sigh. "You'll eat tonight, promise?" I say sternly.

Lou's stiffened posture relaxes. "Okay," she says, visibly relieved. "But no rabbit."

I want to imitate a laugh, squeeze the dark sound out of my chest, but it comes out of its own accord. Still, it sounds awkward like a badly spoken foreign language.

I let Lou watch *Hero of the Week* while I wash the dishes, but the reception is poor. Probably due to the weather. The picture is grainy, but Lou seems to be elsewhere. A few times, I catch her watching me, and each time, she quickly looks back at the TV.

Something is different. This morning, she doesn't look at me as if I might strangle her at any moment, but more like someone she's trying to size up.

Maybe there is also a *Who are you really?* in her eyes. But maybe it's none of that and her gaze is merely the mirror of my wishes.

Later, I connect her to me with the iron chain and pull Lou across the gravel to the RV storage space. The sky is a bright blue and the smell of old spruce wood, young needles, and fresh earth fills the air. The penetrating hammering of a golden woodpecker resounds from the forest.

"Going to be a warm one today," I say to Lou. A typical early summer day in the Yukon, great for setting traps in the cool morning hours and bathing in the green lake by the waterfall in the hot midday. I hope Lou is having at least a little fun.

I gesture for her to step back a little and open the wide hatch. "Put on some hiking boots so you can walk in the forest more easily." I pull out the shoes I ordered online weeks ago—checkered, ankle-high, lace-up boots. "I hope you like them, I made sure to get yellow and pink."

Lou doesn't say anything, but pulls the sunny yellow socks out of the shoes without resistance and puts them on before slipping on the boots.

As I toss her star flip-flops into the compartment, she makes a strange noise. Almost like a startled gasp.

"What's in there?" she wants to know, nodding at the RV storage space.

Surprised at her interest, I hook the hatch flap up so I have both hands free to look at Lou in peace.

"Supplies. Tons of extra food," I tell her.

Lou stares, her mouth hanging open.

I point to some tin cans. "Peaches, pineapple, potatoes, peas, beans, corn, sausage, tuna, Mexican food—sorry… I've always loved that stuff…" Lou is so quiet that I turn mid-sentence. She looks at me like two horns have grown out of my forehead. Maybe she

doesn’t enjoy Mexican food. For me, burritos, enchiladas, green and red salsa, and poblano mole evoke a sense of well-being that dates back to when I was sixteen. I was celebrating my first successful fights and, for the first time in my life, had my own money. Ramon, me, and a bunch of Bones toured the best Mexican restaurants in Los Angeles for weeks. Lou can’t imagine what it feels like to have your fill for the first time.

Stunned, she turns back to the storage area and stares in like I’m marinating corpses in brine. “Don’t worry, I bought a bunch of dried pasta too since I know you like spaghetti,” I say hastily. “Plus red and white sauces and a jar of chopped garlic. The fresh basil may be tricky, but I’ve got pine nuts…there in the back on the left.” I point vaguely to the corner where I think they are, then turn back to Lou.

I don’t know if she realizes that she’s shaking her head. She shifts from one foot to the other, the gravel crunching under the sturdy soles of her boots. Her gaze flies over the labeled boxes and lingers on the two gas bottles.

“Propane. We cook with it.” I use the back of my hand to shoo away an annoying group of black flies buzzing around the front boxes. “And the fridge runs on propane. The two canisters should last us through the winter.”

Lou opens her mouth, closes it, and opens it again. “You want to spend the entire winter here?”

Here or somewhere else—I don’t know what her problem is. She’s trapped anyway. “Sure,” I answer casually. “I plan to stay forever.”

“Won’t it be too cold?” she asks in a thin voice, giving me that odd look again.

I smile now. “I’ve thought of everything, Lou. Don’t worry.” She’s simply afraid we’ll freeze to death in winter. But the way she’s staring at the supplies, I’d better not tell her about the cabin yet. She should get used to this place first. “Nothing bad is going to happen to you out here. And besides,” I add, “civilization is far away but not completely unreachable.”

“So why do you want to catch rabbits if you’ve got this whole thing packed with food?”

I shrug in a vague gesture. “Fresh meat is important. Plus, we can save food this way.”

She swallows like she’s struggling to hold something indigestible in her stomach. “But I don’t want to eat rabbit.” She says it softly and her eyes are filled with unshed tears.

I sigh and unhook the hatch. “I could catch squirrels instead. Or chipmunks,” I say jokingly, locking the closet. *Okay, wrong again*. “Oh, don’t give me that look, Lou,” I say, giving a fake laugh. “I might even bag a deer here and there. Anyway, you don’t *have* to eat it. I brought plenty of multivitamins and iron supplements.”

She turns away, wipes her eyes unobtrusively, and I make a mental note to stop joking about cute rodents in the future. I spontaneously decide not to set the traps right away. “C’mon,” I say cheerfully and playfully tug on the chain that connects us. “I’ll show you around.”

I direct Lou to the lake with the waterfall hidden behind the black fir and spruce tree line. Framed by the dark trees and rocks, the body of water looks like the bright heart of the forest. Its surface reflects the sky, firs, and birches.

Lou turns her head to the right, her gaze shooting up the gray, cascading rock face from which the water falls in a narrow path.

“Like a weathered staircase for giants,” I say aloud.

Ignoring me, Lou balances on some moss-covered rocks before clambering over the trunk of a fallen spruce tree. She looks around again and finally stops with her feet in the water.

“It’s a quiet place,” I say, stepping over the trunk of the tree. A forest lizard disappears between two stones, allowing only the sun to shine on its tail. “Can’t hear anything here but the bubbling of the water and a couple of cheeky birds. If you spend a little time here, it’s like your spirit dissolves into the ether. You become one with the air and the water.”

Lou glances from right to left as if trying to take in the panorama as a whole.

I don’t know if she perceives the atmosphere of this place as much as I do. “This lake has always felt like my safe place, like I was protected here,” I explain. Perhaps that sums it up best: Refuge. Protection. Solace.

Barely audible, Lou snorts, but maybe I imagined it and it was a sound from the woods. “What could you possibly need protection from?” She turns left and walks along the edge of the bank. The water splashes around her feet and the small waves she stirs up rock the reflection of sky and forest.

She slows at a group of boulders, slips between them, and takes a closer look.

“You can swim here if you want,” I suggest, simply to say something. I even have a bikini for her—a pink one, of course, and with little ruffles.

“I can’t swim.”

“You can’t swim?” I repeat, stunned. Somehow that shocks me.

Lou looks at the gray rock and goes a little deeper into the water. The waves slosh into her lace-up boots and goose bumps cover her calves. “Don’t tell me you didn’t know that already?” she asks cynically.

I shake my head but she doesn’t see it. Lou can’t swim. Unbelievable. Even I can swim. I taught myself three years ago in a lake near Faro. And there are hot springs near Ash Springs. They’re the first thing you see when you google the place.

“The water isn’t deep. Three feet, maybe. You’ll be fine, plus I’ll be here.” I wade around a smaller boulder that juts out of the water like a turtle shell. “Or I could teach you.” Not being able to swim is not good in the land of two million lakes.

She stays silent, doesn’t even look at me. Her refusal to speak suddenly angers me again. “Look at me, Louisa!” My voice is laced with impatience and the usual hardness.

When she looks up, her teeth are clenched. Disgust flickers in her eyes, but so does fear. More fear than disgust.

Stop treating me like crap! I want to snap at her, but I choke back the words that are stuck in my throat. They belong to another time. Lou can’t help my past and she can feel whatever she wants—I

promised her that. Again, I have to remember that she must have been talking to me the night I had the blackout. Words of comfort for many hours. She is a strange creature.

What am I supposed to do with her?

I put my hand in front of my eyes and absentmindedly notice Lou staggering back. Maybe she thought I was going to hit her.

I wanted to cheer her up today, distract her from her homesickness, but apparently, she's not ready yet.

"You don't have to fight me all the time," I say anyway, wiping my mouth and nose and letting my arm drop. "You're only making it harder on yourself. Your situation is not going to change, so you might as well try to get along with me."

She turns away again like she can't bear to look at me. Instead, she studies the rock face as if imagining herself climbing it to escape me. I follow her gaze. The stone wall must be sixty feet high. The summer before last, I climbed the first cascades for fun, but even I had to give up halfway through. The trees on the right and left offer no possible support at that height. It would be impossible for Lou to get up there. Totally impossible!

I glance at her and catch her looking from the rock face to her wrist and then straight into my eyes. A mixture of excitement and being caught is reflected in her features. I bet she saw herself climbing up there!

"Forget it!" I snap at her angrily. "The water makes the rock smooth and slippery. You'll fall and break your neck."

"I can think of worse fates," she murmurs more to herself.

"Then I guess I'd better not tempt you!" With a grim face, I hold my wrist with the steel ring right in front of her. "But if you ever want to come here without me, I can always chain you to a tree." I pull her along harder than necessary, not knowing which upsets me more: Lou's rejection or my inability to take it in stride.

"By the way," I add after a while when we come to the rocky creek through which the lake water drains. "If you get lost here, you probably won't last two days."

Lou stops abruptly, the jolt digging the ring on my wrist deep into the injured area. The skin underneath starts to burn. "Why?"

This time I don’t turn to her, but tug on the chain to prompt her to keep walking. She’s probably thinking about the grizzly bears, wood bison, and moose I told her about this morning. For a moment, I consider letting her think that, but it doesn’t seem fair. “You’d freeze to death,” I say curtly. “The weather has already taken the lives of a number of tourists.”

“Freeze to death? It’s summer!” Lou catches up with me in a few quick steps, nearly tripping over a particularly large root.

I pull her cross-country, right through the thicket of conifers, deadwood, blueberry bushes, and ferns. It’s an arduous journey and the spruce branches keep slapping me in the face with their sharp needles, and I’m sure Lou fares the same.

“It is summer. How can you freeze to death in summer?” she asks again a few minutes later. She doesn’t let go of the subject. If her interest in it didn’t annoy me so much, I’d probably be happy she’s talking to me.

“When you fall asleep and don’t realize your campfire is going out and the temperatures fall below zero—for example.”

She says nothing more.

I gently stroke the dead rabbit’s abdomen to empty the bladder before I tie a string around the hind legs and hang the animal upside down from a spruce branch. Lou is sitting in her camp chair by the fire. When we returned from trapping late in the morning, I attached the two chains together and connected one end to a steel ring on the underbody so she can move in a larger radius or even sit by the campfire when I’m in the forest. And today I had to go into the forest more often, not only to check the traps, but also to dispose of our garbage. I can’t burn everything in the campfire. I wash the cans in the lake and store them in the storage compartment until I return to civilization. The cardboard from frozen goods I fold and store away as well, but I also have to bury some things.

After hanging the rabbit, I turn to Lou and find her narrowed eyes on me. Maybe she imagines I could hang her from a branch that way too—no idea what’s going on in her pretty head.

I turn my back on her and remove my sharpest knife from my belt, a killer knife with a curved blade and a finely serrated edge that would require a *permit* in other countries.

"What's that bowl for?" I hear Lou suddenly ask.

I tap my foot lightly on the tin container that I placed under the branch earlier. "To catch the blood." I make a clean cut down the rabbit's throat and step back as the animal bleeds out. "We can make soup out of it, it's incredibly nutritious." I turn to Lou with a grin and laugh when I see her upper lip curl up and her nose wrinkle. Obviously, I have no intention of doing it, but it is true.

Without explaining it to her, I walk a few steps through the spruce tree line with the full bowl, pour the blood into the water, and rinse the bowl.

When I return, Lou looks at me questioningly. "The bowl is empty," she states.

"Did you seriously think I'd make you blood soup?" I tap my forehead. "I collected the blood because of the animals it might attract like wolves and bears."

I go back to the dangling rabbit and make two incisions on the inside of the thighs. I grab the first cut with one hand, separating the fur from the meat while continuing to cut with the other. I turn to Lou for a moment, but she looks away. Naturally. Most people can't butcher or gut the animals they eat. It's satisfying to me, not because of the killing, but because it makes me independent of everything else. As a child, I depended on the monster's favor, receiving only his leftovers or nothing at all, and in the slums, I lived on the garbage of others for years. Hunting gives me a sense of security that no canned food can match.

After loosening the fur, I pull it upward like an upside-down sock, separate it, and cut open the abdomen to gut the animal. I hear the chain jingle and suspect that Lou is disappearing into the RV.

I cut up the rabbit with a small hatchet, put the legs on a skewer and hang them over the fire. I place the rest in a freezer bag and stuff it in a tiny gap between lemon ice cream and frozen donuts.

Lou is sitting at the front of the table since her chain doesn't reach all the way to the back. My gaze lingers on her wrists. She hasn't needed the bandages for a few days, but I now notice how red the skin has become.

I grab two black cloths from the hanging cupboard next to the bunk and sit down on the bench opposite her with a, "Unfortunately, there was no princess pink!" She eyes the cloths suspiciously and then me.

"Don't worry!" I hold up the fabrics. "I merely want to tie them around your wrists so the skin doesn't get infected again."

"I can do it myself."

"Sure, but not as well as I can."

She bites her lip, looks out the window, and holds out her hands to me.

"Lou, I'm not doing this to annoy you, it's just difficult to do with one hand." I carefully push the steel ring up a little and wrap the soft cloth around her wrist. Glowing sparks leap through my veins as I wrap the fabric around it a few times. Glowing sparks, affection, and desire, all together. Not as wild and blazing as before, not as stormy, but gentler.

I tie the cloth with a double knot and repeat the whole thing with her other wrist. "It's easier if we do it on both so…" I stop.

"So you don't have to consider which wrist you use." Lou turns her head and narrows her eyes at me. "I get it."

Nodding, I slide the cuff back into place and stand. "I'll fix you something to eat and then we'll go outside. The shanks are almost ready. Which one you want?"

Lou puts her hand on her stomach and makes a face like she's disgusted.

"You must eat. You promised! So, tell me?"

"Toast," Lou chokes out like it's hard to even say the word.

I stare at her for a long time. I can only hope that she will actually eat something.

The shanks are tender without that typical gamey flavor so many people don't care for. Still, I chew on them like they're tough as leather. The reason for this is Lou. She sits lethargically next to me in the camping chair with a plate with cheese toast and lemon cookies on her lap, but doesn't touch anything. Every second that goes by, I have to pull myself together not to yell at her.

Fucking hell, Lou! I slathered on an extra teaspoon of butter and used the Gouda that you like!

Her refusal to eat leaves me feeling powerless. I have now realized that I would not force her to eat. A few days ago, I would have done it, but not now and I can't say exactly why.

I pull the meat off the leg with my teeth and frantically try to figure out how to get Lou to eat her food. To eat at all.

Gloomily, I study her. She's undone her ponytail again, and because of the high humidity tonight, the strands of her chin-length hair are frizzing. Our eyes meet for a moment and she looks at me with a guilty expression.

She looked at me—guiltily!

I'm the reason for her lack of appetite.

Maybe she'll respond to a deal. So, I'll finally tell her exactly where we are, after all, she keeps asking me. But, for that, she has to eat.

But what am I going to do tomorrow? And the day after tomorrow? I look at her again. She is only the shadow of the girl who fascinated me so much last winter. The image of the newspaper article flashes in front of me—the one in which she is wearing the coral-colored blouse, like today, and is standing under an apple tree, laughing. And suddenly I know what deal I can offer her.

Very fair, Brendan, really now?

Angry at myself, I throw the gnawed bone into the fire, get up, and take the file with the newspaper articles about Lou's disappearance from the closet. After that, I go back to the campfire and sit in the chair with feigned composure with the folder on my thighs.

"These are the newspaper articles I told you about. The ones on your disappearance," I explain calmly.

Lou's lower jaw drops as if she is catching flies.

"You didn't believe I had them." When I look at her, I suppress a smile and something like triumph creeps into my self-contempt. I find that even more despicable.

Lou sits there, frozen. "No." All kinds of emotions flash through her eyes. In the light of the fire, they look like a raging sea that repeatedly crashes against the same cliff in vain, unable to overcome it.

I lean toward her a bit, feeling the heat of the flames on my face. "There are pictures of your brothers in the paper," I say. "One of them looks a lot like you. Avery, I think." It must pierce her heart, but I'll be damned if I can't get her to eat like this.

Lou swallows noisily and I feel like the biggest piece of shit in the world. The monster might have been right.

"Eat today and I'll let you read the first article. You'll get the next one tomorrow…if you eat three meals."

The corners of Lou's mouth drop. For a moment, I think she's about to cry, but then a tremor runs through her body. She inhales and shudders. "Blackmailing me with those articles isn't fair," she says calmly, staring at the folder on my lap. "You know how important they are to me."

Suddenly, there is a lump in my throat, and somehow, everything feels wrong. "I'm not expecting a whole lot in return." My voice is rough. "Not even a smile."

Lou juts her chin out defiantly. "It's still blackmail."

"I'm not a good person. I told you. Hell, I kidnapped you. Blackmail is nothing in comparison."

Without taking her eyes off me, Lou grabs the cheese toast and bites off a huge piece of it. She just gnaws on it for a few seconds, swallows, then pops the other half in her mouth almost all at once. She's still looking at me, unruly and provocative.

"If you puke everything up again, it doesn't count," I say firmly, but I can't completely hide my concern in the tone of my voice.

Lou pushes the entire lemon cookie in and swallows without chewing, only to start coughing violently.

I curse, jump up, and slap her hard on the back. It takes at least two minutes for her to calm down.

"Choking doesn't count either." The softness of my voice is disconcerting and I rest my hand between her shoulder blades a little too long before pulling away.

I go back to my chair, open the file, and examine the contents. "Do you want the first article I have?"

She nods. Her eyes are still glassy from coughing.

I search for the article. I know it almost by heart, I've read it so many times during the first few days.

MISSING LOUISA STILL UNACCOUNTED FOR

I hand Lou the piece of paper. She immediately stretches out her hand, but I'm not yet letting go.

"I don't have the very first article. I was too busy with you, keeping you unconscious. This is the second one."

"Doesn't matter," she whispers, looking at me with impatience in her eyes. *Give it to me!* she screams with every fiber of her body.

I withdraw my fingers and give her a warning look. "Don't forget, you have to earn the others too!" I say and leave her alone. Back in the motorhome, I turn on the outside lights so she can read the small print better. For a moment, I'm tempted to watch her, but after a moment's hesitation, I decide against it. This moment is hers alone.

CHAPTER 17

After a good hour, I finally look out at her. She stands trembling by the fire, watching the newspaper article she threw into it burn. My stomach hardens. It doesn't make any sense why she did that. Maybe she lost hope.

A few minutes later, she enters the RV with wet cheeks and a rattling chain.

"Lou? You okay?" I want to touch her, but I promised her I'd only touch her if necessary. Right now, it might be necessary to stroke her hair or hug her, but that's out of the question. And of course my *you okay* was uncalled for. Nothing has ever been less okay with her, I can see that. Why did I ask such a stupid question?

Tonight, I realize how far I still have to go to be normal. Maybe further than ever before.

Wordlessly, I free her from the second chain so she can go to the bathroom, then cuff her to her sleeping area. The stony pit in my stomach continues to grow, paralyzing my arms and legs with a leaden heaviness.

At night, as I watch Lou sleep, a thousand thoughts, a thousand feelings, and a thousand memories fill me. Maybe because I have experienced what she's going through.

I remember my stepfather. He told me my mom left me with him. The little boy sometimes thought he'd never had a mom. Naturally, my mind knows that is not true. Everyone has a mom. But at times,

it still feels that way. To this day, I don't know why she did such a horrible thing to me. No mom should leave her child with a deranged sadist.

I explain it by assuming she was simply afraid of him. Maybe he did all those bad things to her, too, and she put up with it for a while. Eventually, at an opportune moment, she ran away and left me behind. Sometimes, I believe she spontaneously decided to leave. Maybe she went shopping for him, and in front of the liquor store, it hit her like a bolt of lightning. She decided to use the housekeeping money for a train ride to a better life and that sealed my fate. I like that version best of all. I can live with an impulsive decision better than if she had planned it over time.

Later on, when I lived in the slums and Ramon gave me my name, I initially considered searching for her. But first, I lacked money, and second, I lacked understanding. What could this woman have told me?

I didn't want to hear excuses. Besides, I probably wouldn't have found her anyway. She might have changed her name for fear he might go looking for her.

That night, I watch Lou longer than usual, imagining how she misses her brothers. The boy misses his mom just as much despite what he thinks of her.

Once again, I'm trying desperately to conjure up images that come from an even earlier time, pictures from a life before Thorson Ave, before Los Angeles. There must be images of that, but I can't access them or I was too young like Dr. Watts explained. The picture of my radiant Miss Sunshine must be one of those memories. I know it as sure as I can breathe.

Since that night, everything has changed. At first, I chalked it up as a win since Lou has been eating three meals on most days.

But now, on the fifth day, I feel something is even less right than before.

Her apathy increases. Sometimes, she stays in the same position for hours. She no longer responds to words—and not because she

wants to annoy me. It's like everything flows through her and she's in a completely different place, leaving only her outer shell behind.

Mentally in Ash Springs, she's ignoring the here and now. Maybe she's imagining her life as it could be. Thinking of Ethan, Avery, Liam, and Jayden.

I'd love to help her, but I can't reach her. Even her necklace, which she used to hold so often in her hand, no longer seems to have any meaning for her.

The wall she builds around her is impassable. Sometimes, when she's lying on her bed staring at the ceiling, I sit next to her and talk to her.

"What do you want to do tomorrow? See more of the area? Or we could go to the lake again? Perhaps you'd like to learn which berries are edible?" I know she hears my questions, but nothing comes out of her. She is completely withdrawn. She won't fight anymore, not against me, not against her hopelessness. Her mental exhaustion knows no bounds and I don't know how to help her. I'm secretly praying for a miracle even though I've never believed in a god. It makes me want to bang my head against the radiator because it doesn't take God to save Lou. I could solve this problem by letting her go, dropping her off in Ash Springs and saying: *Okay, Lou, it didn't work out.*

More and more often, I become afraid that she might never pull out of this state. Outwardly, I appear imperturbable. I do all the chores; wash our laundry in the lake, fill and empty the water tanks, and pick lots of fresh blueberries. But inside me there is a chaos of feelings. Rarely have I felt anything more than anger, loneliness, and emptiness. Now there are sensations I've only ever tried to imitate before. Concern, pity, affection. Real affection, not obsession that leaves no room for other thoughts. This upsets me. It makes me someone who I don't recognize and I don't know how it might progress or if that someone won't scare me one day.

This morning, as I'm heading to inspect the two rabbit traps and build a new one, I leave Lou chained to the RV. I've given up asking

since she doesn’t want to come anyway.

Before I leave, I put a blanket over her shoulders so she doesn’t get cold. As always, she’s dressed scantily as if she doesn’t care if she gets sick.

I take the path through the spruce tree line and walk along the stony lake shore. Coolness rises from the water’s surface, bathing the heart of the forest in cold, clear beauty. The coniferous forest all around is still full of morning shadows, the sky gray blue with only a few rays of sunshine reaching the ground. At dawn, they look like bars of light. It’s too bad Lou doesn’t want to see this.

I search the area and decide to set the new trap near the creek. I walk along the embankment for a while, trampling a couple of Canadian bush nettles and eventually return to the thicket. After a few minutes, I pull up the hood of the sweatshirt because of the cold.

I can’t get Lou and her grief out of my head. Should I force her to go out with me again? We could hike along the creek, maybe to the rocky gorge at the top of the mountain, it only takes half an hour following the deer trail.

Lost in thought, I stop at a spruce tree to tie a red cloth to it. The location is perfect for a trap as it is on the deer trail and not far from the creek. As I tie the last knot, a faint sound reaches my ear. The whining of an animal. It reminds me of the whimpering of a beaten child who can no longer find words in his pain. Black light flickers in front of me for a moment. Out of instinct, I put my hands up to cover my ears, but then I think about it and lower my arms again. I need to see what’s going on. The whining sounds like it’s from a young animal. Young ones around the RV pose a risk if the parents perceive us as a threat. It could be a fox cub or a wolf pup. Or a grizzly cub. Maybe its mother is nearby, too.

I stand still for a moment and listen intently.

I must be close. The sounds are only soft because the animal is weak. I carefully walk around the spruce to which I tied the cloth and step over several broken branches. A chipmunk darts away. Now the whining is right below me. In slow motion, I squat down and

brush aside a few feathery fern leaves with the back of my hand. My heart beats faster.

Luckily, not a bear cub!

A tiny wolf cub is crawling all alone on the ground.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" The cub turns in circles as if completely lost. Its tiny legs tremble in a futile attempt to keep running, but the next moment, it falls over and just lies there.

"You're way too skinny, you know that?" I reach out to it and it immediately licks my fingers. Its tongue is rough and tender. It's not afraid of me, at least, it hardly reacts to me, only to my hand. This is bad. I've read a lot about wolves since the first pack established their territory on my land. I don't remember everything, but this cub is definitely too skinny for its age. I carefully feel the protruding ribs, pluck a few ticks from the fur and throw them back into the ferns in disgust.

There's no way I can leave it here. A few feet to the left, I discover a cave, directly below a mound of earth. It is unusual for a young to lie in front of it and not in it. I creep closer and cautiously peer into the dark tunnel. Silence. No sound emerges from the darkness. I lean further toward the opening. The cave appears empty, at least, as far as I can tell.

Apparently, the mother wolf left it behind. Something we have in common that immediately draws me to it. I step back and pick up the tiny bundle. I gently place my hand on its back, feeling the soft, fluffy fur between my fingers. It reminds me of Blacky. Its rough tongue is licking my thumb, awakening another memory: me lying huddled in the closet, my hand twisted in the manacle. There isn't a spot on my body that doesn't hurt. The monster beat me with a belt until I stopped moving. Even today, I sometimes hear the cracking of the punches and my insides convulse.

Are you crying, you wimp? Are you crying?

N-no, sir.

Then you obviously haven't had enough, right?

And he struck me again just because his dog came to me, licked my hand, and jumped up on me. It loved me, not him. At the time, I was certain that was the real reason and not the spilled varnish.

The tiny wolf pup whines and I realize how hard I'm digging my fingers into its fur.

"What am I going to do with you?" I ask loudly, looking at the stream. It's too weak, it won't make it. It will fall victim to another animal. That would be the natural course of things and it would help the other being, but I don't want to leave it to that fate.

If I were fair, I'd drown it to spare it further agony. But then I think about Blacky again, lying in the crate… I hold the pup in front of my face, examining it from all sides.

"You're male, aren't you?" I say. Luckily, it doesn't seem to have any parasites. The fur doesn't look shaggy yet and it's clearly calling for help.

"You know what? I'll take you to Lou and give you something to eat!" I hold it against my body with one arm and lay the other one over it as I walk back. This time, I don't bother to move quietly through the undergrowth, but rush forward. I don't care how many animals I startle with the noise.

"Lou! You have to see this!" I call out when I'm only halfway through the tree line. With long strides, I climb over blueberry bushes and dead wood and get caught on a branch near the ground at the edge of the clearing. I stumble forward, cursing, but catch myself in time.

Lou stares blankly at me before discovering the bundle of fur in my arms. Her eyes widen.

"Here, take it!" I don't give her any time to reply and just place the cub in her hands as if it were natural. "A wolf pup," I explain before she starts thinking it's a grizzly and make a dash for the rear of the motorhome. "I found him near a cave." For a moment, I look at Lou, who is holding the tiny wolf as gently as she would a baby. "I heard him whining," I say, opening the RV's rear compartment. There has to be the powdered milk I bought in abundance at a Walmart somewhere in here. There are at least twelve large packages that were supposed to last us all winter. I climb into the opening on my knees and push a few boxes aside until I find the one that says *Winter/Milk/Fruit* in bold letters.

"You didn't steal him from his mother, did you?" I suddenly hear Lou ask from nearby. Apparently, she followed me.

I glance over my shoulder in disgust. "Of course not! Who do you think I am?" I shake my head in disbelief, although her question is justified. I stole her from her brothers, so why should I have any qualms about taking a mother's pup?

I rummage around in the box with both hands. "Come on… I know I bought you…"

I impatiently pull out a few cans of preserved peaches and forcefully set them down on the tin floor. A mighty rattle rumbles through the storage space. "I figure his mom rejected him. Or she died and the other cubs were eaten. Any number of possibilities…" I feel like I have to explain it to Lou. I don't want her to think that I simply took the cub.

I hear her say something, but judging by the affectionate tone, it's for the cub, not me. After searching the winter containers and not finding anything, I climb a little further back. If Lou were to slam the door shut now, I'd be stuck in the storage area.

It's a good thing she's on the chain and I have the key.

"I think he's hungry," she says, somewhat at a loss.

"What do you think I'm doing in here?" I grumble, annoyed. "I'm trying to find the powdered milk. I'm positive I bought some in case we run out of canned."

At that moment, I discover a box. *Milk here!* is written on it, even underlined and with a bold exclamation mark. I vaguely remember repackaging the milk shortly before my departure.

"You bought powdered milk?" Lou sounds stunned again, but not quite as desperate.

I quickly open the lid, pull out a packet of powder, and crawl backward before Lou actually slams the door shut.

"Of course." Smiling triumphantly, I slide out of the storage compartment and hold the blue package in Lou's face. "Got it." I glance at the pup in Lou's arms—like he always belonged there. A strange pang burns in my heart, a fleeting memory of something I once thought.

Mother. Father. Child.

"I hope he drinks it"—I look at her seriously—"if not, I'll have to drown him."

"What?" Stunned, she hugs the wolf even tighter.

"So he won't suffer, I mean."

"You're insane!" Her blue eyes sparkle with indignation. "That is completely out of the question."

I raise my hands reassuringly. "Lou, be reasonable. If he doesn't drink any milk, he'll starve and he'll die a miserable, painful death. Is that what you want?"

She takes a few steps back, and in that second, all I can think about is that she's going to be a good mom to her kids when it's time. Children she may have with me. Eventually. I watch her as she stands there caressing the tiny wolf's fluffy fur. A tender, wild desire pulses in my stomach. For a moment, we stare at each other.

"He'll drink it," Lou says quietly, her eyes glowing with determination. "I know he will!"

Lou followed me into the RV and simply took it upon herself to wrap the pup in my dark blue fleece sweater. I see this as progress because usually, she asks my permission for everything. *May I open the window? May I go to the bathroom? May I watch Hero of the Week? May I lie down*.

"We have to weigh him so we can monitor if he's growing," I say and turn on the gas burner to boil the water for the milk. Then, I rummage around in the kitchen drawers until I find the sandwich bags. Three years ago, when I decided to venture into the wild, I watched a lot of wildlife documentaries. In one, two farmers found an orphaned fox cub and nursed it with milk in bags. They didn't have milk bottles and the tractor had to be repaired. Until they were mobile again, they fed the little one from these plastic bags and it worked—until the fox was old enough and never came back from its excursion into the wild.

But wolves are different from foxes. Wolves bond quickly with humans, and when they love someone, they love them forever.

I remove a plastic bag and make a point of holding it up for Lou to see. "This'll be our milk bottle."

She frowns like it's not good enough for the wolf. "That? How?" she asks skeptically.

I put the bag next to the milk and use the enclosed spoon to measure out the amount of powder I need. "I'll cut off one corner and he can suckle on it like a teat." I carefully pour the powder into a measuring cup and look at Lou, who uses my sweater to warm the pup with her hands. "The first domesticated wolves were nursed by human women. Did you know that?" An image of Lou breastfeeding the pup pops into my head and I can't help but smile in amusement. "I doubt that would work with you though."

She practically pierces me with her gaze. I turn away quickly, grab the scale from the base cabinet, and place it on the table.

I press the *On* button with my thumb. "Go ahead, put him on there before we feed him."

Lou unwraps the pup from my fleece sweater and lays him on the smooth surface. The way he lies there is a pathetic sight. He's shaking and won't stop whimpering.

"Hurry up, he's getting cold." Lou is standing now, her hands clenched.

I press the button again and read the display. "Seventeen and a half ounces." Dammit, he's even lighter than I feared! "Way too scrawny. Wolf pups normally weigh that when they're newborns and this one must be three or four weeks old."

"How can you tell?" Lou boldly grabs the pup and wraps him once more in my sweater as if to protect him from me. And indeed, he is suddenly quiet as if he knows that only good things will happen to him with her.

"His eyes are open," I tell her. "So, he's more than two weeks old. Plus, he reacts to sounds. Watch!" I let out a throaty sound, a wolf howl like I made greeting the pack on my property two years ago. I must have been desperate, I think. Desperate and extremely lonely.

The little guy in my sweater probably thinks my howl is lifelike because he immediately starts yowling, this time even louder than before.

“See!” I tell Lou happily. “They don’t start doing that for at least three weeks.”

Lou looks at me sternly. “You’re scaring him,” she replies angrily. With the wrapped wolf on her lap, she turns away from me as if shielding him from me.

I laugh. “This guy? Nah.” The kettle on the stove begins to whistle, so I turn and prepare the milk. I realize I’m usually different. I laugh because I feel like it not because I think it’s appropriate. Measuring cup in hand, I turn to Lou and study her for a moment. All her interest is focused on the pup, who is making pitiful noises again. “Believe it or not,” I say impulsively, “there are people and animals in this world that aren’t scared of me.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get your food in a minute,” she whispers to the little one, not responding to what I said. Maybe she didn’t hear it.

Suddenly, she jerks her head up. “Do you think he can handle the powder?”

I shrug. “Hopefully. The first question is if he’ll drink it at all. He’s pretty weak.” If his mother left him, she must have thought he wasn’t going to survive. Perhaps he seemed sickly to her. I briefly think of my mom and think maybe I seemed weak to her too. Angrily, I suppress the thought and continue talking. “Sometimes, wolf mothers bury their young. Actually, they only do that when they believe the pup is dead.”

“Maybe she was about to bury him but something startled her.”

“Maybe. Or the mother wanted to move to a new den.” *And never came back*. I add cool water to the milk before pouring it all into the bag. I tie off the top of the bag and hand it to Lou with a “Hold this for a second!”

I go to the cupboard above the side door.

This is where I keep most things Lou could use to do damage if she got her hands on them: narcotics, tools, knives, and scissors. I reach for a pair of nail scissors to cut open the pouch and turn back to Lou.

She sits transfixed, staring at the compartment behind me with bright eyes. A dark feeling crosses my heart like a shadow.

Oh, yes, Lou, now you've seen it. Yeah, the stuff has to be hidden somewhere.

The spark of exuberance I felt a few minutes ago is no more.

"Give me the bag," I say calmly, but my insides are screaming. And my eyes convey something completely different: *Never again! Never try to escape again!*

As she hands me the milk, her fingers tremble like they did in the beginning, but I can't stop staring at her like I'm a sniper aiming at his target.

I snip a tiny hole in the bag with the tip of the scissor blade and hold it shut. "That should do it." I nod my head. "Do you want to feed him?" My voice is still too dark, too controlled by the waves of anger in me. I could smack myself—the bar on the good feelings is stuck.

Lou looks at me and then the pup. "May I?" she asks, uneasy.

"Why not?" My forced smile tightens my face muscles. "If you're doing that, you can't exactly run away, can you?" *Tread lightly!*

"No," she whispers. She clumsily takes the milk bag from me, holds the hole closed, and looks at him, clueless.

"Want help?" I sit next to her and try to suppress the uneasy feelings in me: the fear Lou might leave and the anger it triggers; but they cannot be completely expelled.

The tension between us smolders like August heat over a paved road.

Lou scoots up against the wall with the wolf on her lap and gives me an anxious look.

Still scared! Obviously, considering the way you reacted again, Bren. As if her thoughts of escaping were a crime.

I remain seated on the outer edge of the bench, still close, and point to the pup. "Put the open corner to his mouth and drip the milk on his upper lip. A few drops should be enough." At least that's how they did it in the documentary.

Lou nods. She carefully guides the bag to the cub's mouth and lets go of the bottom opening. As the milk dribbles out, I quickly grab the animal's head and turn it to the side. Drop by drop, the thick milk falls onto his lips.

The young wolf almost rolls over, frantically kicking his paws into the fleece as if he wants to stimulate the flow of milk. His whimpering has given way to restless sucking and he's far too excited, thrashing about, milk speckling his face.

I scoot closer to Lou, ignoring her tense posture. With both hands, I turn the pup onto his stomach and hold him so he doesn't fidget. "Try…holding the bag at an angle!"

Lou does as suggested and finally the wolf catches the tip of the milk bag at exactly the right angle. There are soft smacking noises as his paws clumsily push my fingers, but he is drinking. At some point, he apparently realizes he is not dreaming and closes his eyes, but continues to suck.

"His heart's racing," I say softly, feeling his heartbeat pounding in my palms. "But he's doing well."

"Yeah."

I look at Lou. Lost in thought, she gazes at the small bundle of life on her lap. A smile has crept onto her face and something inside me flutters like the wind and sky. All my fear and anger has suddenly vanished.

"You're smiling for the first time," I say softly, not knowing if she's noticing it herself.

Her smile dies.

Wrong again, Brendan!

If only I had kept my mouth shut! I watch Lou feed the pup for a while, still holding him on his stomach.

"You should give him a name," I say thoughtfully.

She shakes her head vigorously. "No." She smooths the bag with her fingers, increasing the flow of milk. "I can't name him knowing you might drown him."

"That's exactly why you should name him." I think back to the time the Bones called me *Hoover*. *Hoover* for Hoover Avenue, where Ramon found me starving behind a dump back then.

"Why?" she asks, genuinely surprised.

"You want him to die without a name?" I retort.

Lou looks at me and then at the cub, a sad look in her eyes. "Names make it harder. Names bind you to things. Names give

meaning."

"If he doesn't have a name, it means he isn't important." I hear Ramon's voice in my mind: *Everyone should know his name, Hoover. Names are like a fucking birthright or something like that. You may not know your mom, but you should at least know what name she called you, right?*

I'm still holding the young wolf. Glancing back at Lou, it seems like she's actually thinking of a name for the little one. "Maybe not necessarily P*rincess*," I say, smiling.

"So, he's a male…right?" Lou squeezes the remaining milk out of the bag with both hands.

"Yep."

I wait a moment until the pouch is completely empty, then pick up the cub and set him back on the fleece sweater. His eyes are closed. He may fall asleep now that he's finally had enough.

Lou lovingly covers him. "How do you know so much about wolves?" She looks tenderly at the bundle of fur on her lap.

I lean back and look at the cub as well. "I've spent a couple of summers in the wilderness and read up on a few things, but you also learn a lot through experience." For example, how to howl with the wolves.

"Do you think he'll make it?"

As soon as she asks, the pup retches.

"Dammit!" Cursing, I pick him up. "I hope he doesn't have roundworms." I don't have medicine for roundworms with me. The little guy vomits dryly a few times, then a whole load of warm milk spills onto my hands and drips onto the floor. I wait a moment, hoping he calms down, but he continues gagging until he's thrown up more than he could have drunk.

Lou bites her lower lip tensely.

"I think there's probably no point," I say softly, stroking the little one's head. "He's too weak to keep the milk down."

"We gave him too much," Lou replies quickly. "He should not have had that much at once."

I look at Lou and push down any feelings. I don't want her to notice that I'm wavering. "Sorry, I don't think this little guy's going

to live."

"You're not giving him a chance!" Lou's eyes fill with tears in a matter of seconds. "You don't even want to try."

Again, her tears leave me completely helpless, messing everything up.

"I just don't want him to suffer," I reply more harshly than intended.

"But I'm suffering and you don't care about that. You haven't drowned me in the lake yet."

Her words catch me so off guard, I wince. "That's different!" I snap.

"No, it isn't. Give him a chance! *Please*." A tear rolls down her cheek.

"Lou…" I don't even know what to say. Her reaction overwhelms me. I look from her to the pup in my arms and can't tell at the moment which of the two needs help more urgently.

"Please!" Lou's chin trembles. "Please, let's just try! I'll feed him every hour if I have to. A few drops each time. He can sleep in my bed and I'll carry him around and keep him warm."

I suppress a smile. "Maybe I should get sick one of these days too…" I try to joke and hold the pup in front of my face. "What do you think, big fella?"

He hangs there limply as if he has already given up.

"Bren, please!"

She has never begged you like this for anything. Besides, she even smiled for the first time in weeks. Don't be a monster…not again, not this time!

I sigh deeply and look from the little one to Lou and back again. I should have drowned him in the lake and not even told Lou about it. "Okay," I finally give in. "We'll try it for a day. But if he's not doing any better after that, I'm going to put him out of his misery."

"Three days," Lou protests. "One isn't enough." She reaches for the pup and I hand him to her as gently as I can.

After that, I go to the sink, turn on the water, and rinse the vomited milk off my hands. "Two," I decide finally. "And you give him a name."

"Grey," she replies like a shot from a pistol.

I turn to her in surprise. "Grey? Why Grey?" Okay, he has gray fur with a shot of cognac in between…

As she leans forward and snuggles her face into the pup fur, I smile again. I'm smiling a hell of a lot today.

"It's the name of a story my brother wrote for me," she finally says, her voice slurred by the fur on her lips.

A strange feeling of loneliness spreads through me. It's odd that she would confide in me when she fundamentally hates me. No one has ever written a story for me, and I never had siblings. For a while, Ramon was like my brother. No, he considered me a brother, but I did not allow for a friendship. I was grateful to him. That was my connection to him. I was grateful for all the things he did, but I didn't trust him. I just couldn't. There's something in me that can't break free from all my past experiences. To hurt people. That's the only lesson I learned.

I surreptitiously eye Lou, who is still snuggling her nose in the pup's fur. I, of all people, am asking her to trust me even though I am unable to do so.

This is paradoxical. And now she even shows me a bit of trust by opening up and making herself vulnerable.

An amazing girl. A peculiar girl.

At least she stopped crying.

All of a sudden, she raises her head as if she's been following my every thought and I feel caught. I should say something nice, something to let her know that I don't want to shut her brothers out of her mind.

"Jayden?" I ask because he's the only one of the Scriver brothers who writes stories.

She nods and looks at me, but it is through me as if she is seeing something from another time. I can't read the expression in her eyes, but it seems to me there is pain and happiness in a single memory. *Crazy*.

"Okay," I shake off the odd sensation and point to the pup. "Grey it is."

I explain to her how to prepare the milk and that she must under no circumstances use the chlorine-laced water from the taps. "I'll start keeping the propane on all the time. I've been turning it off whenever I leave you here by yourself," I state, ending my lecture.

"Why?" Lou asks, stroking Grey's head with her hand.

"In case there was a gas leak or the stove malfunctions," I tell her. "If the gas escapes, it would get dangerous in here. And around the RV, of course. I didn't want to risk you getting hurt."

"So what are you going to do now?" She looks at me carefully.

I look at Grey. He stopped whining and fell asleep. I pray Blacky, in all his agony, just fell asleep at some point and was no longer scared. "If you want to feed him every hour, you'll have to use the stove. Which means I can't turn off the gas." I point to a small white box on the base of a kitchen cabinet. "That's a propane gas detector. Gas is heavier than air, which is why it's not on the ceiling like a smoke detector. If there's a gas leak, it'll go off. And then you have to evacuate the RV immediately."

Lou puts her hand in the air like a schoolgirl and the chain rattles. "I won't get too far."

Of course, the chains pose a problem now. I don't want to do without them, but if a fire does break out, Lou would be trapped.

"I suppose I can stop putting out traps for two days, right?" I muse aloud. "If we save a little water, I won't have to fetch it as often."

"Or you could leave the chains off for two days, right?" Lou smiles at me, and even though it looks strained, I'm pleased.

Nevertheless, it is out of the question. "So you can run away again the first chance you get and put yourself in danger?" I shake my head vehemently. "No, thanks."

"You'll have to trust me. The way I trust you to not hurt me."

Ha! Like she could wrap me around her finger that easily.

"My trust is earned. I don't just give it out." I lean against the counter, cross my arms, and squint at her.

Lou tilts her head and a few hairs fall across her face. "Then give me a chance to prove myself. No chains for two days."

There's something in her eyes. She looks at me like she did back in the visitor center parking lot; her eyes sparkling as if before an imminent adventure. Like she's dying to be alone with me so I can kiss her.

No! No! No!

"How else are you going to find out if I'm trustworthy?" she replies challengingly, and gives me another smile. A genuine Lou smile that makes me vibrate like I've swallowed a hummingbird.

Rigidly, I stare at her even though everything inside me is in turmoil. "You're not playing fair—and you know it," I say, not knowing whether to be angry or happy.

"What's fair anyway?" Her voice falters a little, but she continues smiling. She's truly brave. Maybe she deserves a tiny concession. The whole time she was so apathetic, so distant. Today, she is alive again for the first time. Maybe I need to finally show her that I'm not the uncompromising creep she believes I am. While I'm reluctant to take that leap of faith, I can certainly arrange to keep an eye on her.

No, Brendan!

Yes, that could work. It'll only be for two days, after all.

Without a word, I walk to the cupboard over the sink and find the bells I've stowed on one of the top shelves. I once read an article somewhere about how to prevent domestic cats from catching young birds. The owners gave them collars with bells so that they jingled with every step. I think that's animal cruelty, but Lou isn't a cat with extremely sensitive hearing.

Just a weird, amazing, kidnapped, lonely girl.

"What are you going to do with those?" Lou asks, dumbfounded, when I show her the bells in my hands. "Tie them around my neck like a dog?"

"Something like that." I turn away again and grab some zip ties from the same closet. "The bells will tell me where you are at all times. Now you can even walk around outside without worrying about bears. I was planning on doing it this way from the beginning, but you were more difficult than I expected…" I can't help it, but her indignant expression makes me smile again.

“So, you’re going to put the bells on me and then I don’t have to wear the chain?” she asks, stunned. It appears she wants to stuff the bells down my throat.

I nod curtly. “We’ll try it this way for the next two days. Not at night, obviously.”

Lou pets the pup’s head. “What if I have to feed Grey at night?” she asks with an innocent angelic look.

I eye her skeptically. Her expression does not give me a clue if she’s been lying to me or if she’s going to abandon Grey if an opportunity to escape presents itself.

“While I’m awake, it’s not a problem. For when I’m not, I can chain you to the kitchen.”

“Good idea,” she whispers, a little too sweetly to be believable.

I snort in disgust, but I’m glad she’s not so depressed anymore.

CHAPTER 18

That night I sit by the fire for a long time. It's one of those starry Yukon nights where the sky above me looks like an imperturbable black sea with millions upon millions of white points of light. It seems as if the firmament itself is a piece of eternity. I recall the cold day in December when I looked out of the log cabin at the stars.

Girls' hearts.

It all started with those words. I found Lou. And now she is so much more than I expected. Basically, I don't even know what I was actually expecting. Anything somehow. And I thought it would be easier. As if I could get Lou to leave everything behind at the push of a button. Of course that was a misconception, and to be honest, I didn't want to delve into all the details. It was easier to indulge my fantasies and leave the rest for later.

I grab my sketch pad and pencils from the closet, but I soon find that I don't need to draw to feel better. I'm actually feeling better. With the pad on my lap, I smoke a cigarette and listen to Lou rattling dishes in the RV.

There's something calming about it because before, she was always so still, just lying or sitting on the bed.

Today, she was occupied with Grey all day. The kitchen is a battlefield of kettles, leftover milk powder, bags, and dishes. In the

evening, I couldn't even do the dishes because Lou took up the entire work surface with Grey's paraphernalia.

The tiny wolf always seems to be hungry and now drinks every half hour. Luckily, he's keeping most of the milk down and I'm praying he'll put on a few pounds by weigh-in day. Lou didn't have time to be unhappy today because she was so busy feeding the pup. She built a lair out of blankets, but still carried Grey around with her most of the time, even to the bathroom. I hope she's not afraid I'd steal him from her and drown him without her knowing.

As I walk back to the RV for a beer, I hear her talking to him through the open windows. Automatically, I stop. Her clear voice rushes through me like the wind through the aspens, reminding me of my dream. That's how she talked to me during the blackout.

Carefully, without stepping on fallen branches, I creep over the gravel until I reach the side wall.

"It's okay, Grey," I hear her whisper lovingly. "I'll make sure he doesn't drown you. He wants you to make it, too. I know it, even if he doesn't say so."

And again I smile.

The two days I gave Grey are over. Lou is nervous and has hardly eaten. She's constantly trying to make eye contact with me. I think she wants to ask me to give him another day, but she hasn't said anything. For the past hour, she has been pacing up and down in the RV, the little bells tinkling and the little wolf tucked away in the sling I made for her from a sheet. She keeps muttering something under her breath, words of comfort for Grey that I don't understand. But I love that tone of voice. And it kind of calms me down too because, without meaning to, I'm almost as nervous as Lou is even though I'd never show her that.

Around noon, I put her out of her misery by getting the kitchen scale out of the cupboard. "Come on, it's time." With deliberate calm, I place the digital scale in the middle of our dining table.

Pale-faced, Lou stops and hugs Grey.

"Put him on!" I order as she makes no move to let go of the wolf. I know my cool manner is supposed to hide my own feelings, but I can't help it. The only way I could drown Grey in the lake is if he actually lost weight. The idea is even worse than force-feeding Lou like a fattened goose.

Lou's hands tremble like electric eels as she places the wolf on the scale.

"You need to let go of him, Louisa!"

With visible reluctance, she lets go of the ball of fur and looks at me wide-eyed as if she could change my mind with pleading looks if necessary.

I push the button and hold my breath. Twenty-five ounces! Thank goodness. *He will make it. Thank God he will make it!*

"He's gained eight ounces," I say more matter-of-fact than I feel like. "That's good."

"It is?" Lou licks her lips nervously. She looks at me anxiously and I nod. What else am I supposed to do?

"So you're not going to drown him?" she asks, reaching for Grey as if she doesn't trust me.

"No." I'm faster and pick up the pup and hand him to her like a gift. "I think he's turned a corner. Now all we can do is hope he continues gaining weight. You should probably go on feeding him frequently for a few more days." I watch her and notice how tired she appears to be. "Every two hours, maybe. I'll help if you want. I can do part of the night shift."

She blinks a few times and stifles a yawn. "Sounds good," she mumbles. "It'd be great to get a few hours of sleep in a row again."

At that moment, it feels like we're friends fighting for a common cause. It's like she's not scared of me anymore. A spark of hope creeps into my chest and I can breathe more easily. "Okay," I say, feeling more relaxed than I've felt in a long time. "I'll take the second half of the night, then."

She nods, seemingly open and relaxed.

I venture further. "Do you want to eat outside with me tonight?" Just to do something, I grab the kitchen scale and put it in the lower

cupboard. “We could drink to Grey’s will to live,” I suggest, hoping to strike the right note. When she doesn’t reply, I straighten up again.

She clings to Grey for help. *Damn it*…

“Hey, Lou!" I take a step toward her and, out of an inner urge, tug at a ragged strand of hair that’s almost touching her shoulder. “It’s only eating dinner and a toast. Maybe laughing a little—that’s all,” I say softly.

“Eating and toasting,” Lou repeats, a little breathlessly. “Okay, if you promise not to put anything in my drink.”

She can’t still think that! “I thought we were past that,” I say grumpily.

“And I thought you weren’t going to touch me,” she squeaks. Irregular patches of red light up her cheeks, one of which is in the shape of Africa. I remind myself of how difficult it is for me to trust anyone.

I raise my hands apologetically. “Sorry, I was joking. And it was only your hair.”

“Bad joke,” she chokes out, hugging Grey tightly to her chest.

I nod curtly. “I agree I shouldn’t have provoked you.”

We stand in front of each other for a while with neither of us saying a word. If only I had kept my fingers to myself! I was so close to gaining her trust. Now she stands there and looks everywhere but at me.

Sure, she thinks she knows what I want from her. And I told her I would wait until she was ready. But this is only dinner and a beer. What’s so bad about that? That doesn’t necessarily mean sex, does it?

At some point, I can’t bear to see her standing in front of me so embarrassed.

“So, what do you think about this evening?” I ask, bothered by the jittery feeling in my chest. I forcefully try to suppress it, but I suppose I’d make more progress ordering a grizzly to give me his salmon.

Lou looks at me warily as if trying to figure out what’s going on inside me. “Only if you don’t put the chain on me,” she suddenly blurts. “Um, I mean…because it’s been two days, and…” she

stammers, and a faint blush covers the hectic spots. "And you said two days…"

I can only stare at her, thinking how cute she looks. Her cheeks glow and her tousled blonde hair sticks out in all directions due to the short night. Her clothes are sweaty and wrinkled, she even has a chocolate stain on her chin probably from the donuts.

She's miles away from the Lou in the photos, but I don't care. I would like to pull her into my arms and hug her so that she feels close to someone else and knows that she is not alone. And…well… I'd like to kiss her.

It is incredibly difficult for me to only shrug.

"I was planning on leaving them off during the day anyway," I hear myself saying and wonder which part of me is taking over at the moment. "At least while Grey needs to be fed. After that, we'll see."

Now she's finally gotten you to cave, Brendan Connor. Fuckin' hell —you're a naive dumbass. She will flee as soon as she has the opportunity.

She won't!

Yes, she will!

No, she won't! She's starting to trust me!

My stupid heart just won't stop hoping!

CHAPTER 19

With a lot of concentration, I manage to get my work done and still know exactly where Lou is. I retrieved reserve water for the tanks, chlorinated it, and put the canisters in the storage area. I postpone other tasks such as washing clothes at the lake for a later time.

Lou is busy with Grey all afternoon. I collect birch bark and firewood in the vicinity and occasionally peek through the windows into the RV. Lou doesn't even notice. She is usually boiling water or washing dishes, sometimes she is sitting on the bench stroking Grey's wooly fur.

The sun is barely above the dark green treetops when we agree on making Lou's favorite dinner that evening. In fact, she proposes it and I mark it as another milestone in our history.

"You know what I think?" she asks when I pause between two loads of firewood. She sits cross-legged on the bench, scratching Grey's neck. I wipe the sweat from my forehead and shake my head.

"I think this wolf has grown four inches in the last few hours!" She looks at me so seriously, like it's a big damn deal. "Honestly!"

She pats Grey's head and I smile. I don't know what's going on, but something is happening. With me. With Lou. With us.

In the evening, I collect a gigantic supply of firewood, which I neatly pile up behind the RV. There is not enough storage space, so I am considering building a low shed in the next few days to store the wood in a dry place for when it rains. I'm stuffing the birch bark in the gaps between the stacked wood when I hear Lou cursing and laughing at the same time from inside. It is a strange sequence of noises, sounding a bit like a mixture of howling and snorting into water mixed with the wild ringing of bells.

"Bren!"

"What is it?" I straighten up and walk around the RV. Lou comes through the side door and points almost reproachfully at Grey's little head, of which I can only see the tiny ears.

"I don't know if this little guy is mistaking me for a tree, but he's peed on me three times already!" Lou says, glaring at Grey.

I raise my eyebrows. "Didn't you pad the towel with cloths?"

"Yes, but they're soaked." Lou nods to a stack of damp terry cloth towels on the side of the stairs. "And he got a spot on the sling, too."

The pee spot is no larger than the palm of a hand. "Let's go to the lake and wash them out. If you only rinse the spot, you can put him directly back in."

Lou purses her lips. "Well, he shouldn't have done it. I take him on walks day after day, spoil him from head to toe, and what does he do…" She falls silent as if noticing how casually she is talking to me.

"You wanted to keep him," I say quickly so she doesn't think about it any longer. "By the way, wolves don't mark their territory at this age. That comes later."

Lou looks down at Grey. "Well, let's hope Grey won't keep on peeing in the RV."

"Sometimes they defecate too."

"That's disgusting!"

"No—it's natural." I go to the bucket by the fireplace and pull out the jar of soft soap I usually use for the laundry. "Come on!" I nod in Lou's direction. "Let's go to the lake."

"What about the towels?"

"We can wash them together with the other laundry."

I start walking and the faint ding-ding-ding tells me she's following. She catches up at the spruce tree line. The dry wood cracks under our feet, a startled sable leaps away, and above us, a few finches chirp in the last specks of light.

When we reach the lakeshore, Lou naturally hands me Grey. I sit down on the fallen log on the bank and place him on my lap. I carefully stroke his fur and watch Lou pull a corner of the cloth through the lake and then rub the paste-like soap on it. Her golden hair shimmers in the low sun. Now that it's shorter and missing the bright tips, it's a mix of cinnamon and flax. I drown in this sight. Lou, kneeling in front of the lake in her capri jeans and white blouse, gently gliding the cloth through the water. The waterfall gurgles and fills the place with a calm vitality.

I feel an unfamiliar stillness inside me. It has nothing to do with the peace of this place. It's like I'm standing in the eye of a tornado, like the world could end next to me and I wouldn't mind. The reason for this is Lou. Lou is like coming home.

She is much more than the Alaskan girl or the sun girl. Now it seems silly to me that I ever called her that. Did I truly once believe that I knew her? I didn't know then how caring she could be. She even helps her worst enemy when in need. I thought everything would be easy for her, but I didn't know about her bravery.

As Grey licks my fingers, he snaps me out of my wandering thoughts. He's not hungry again, is he? I suppress a grin and play with him a bit, letting him bite my index finger with his baby teeth, only to pull my hand back.

"If he puts on enough weight, we can change his diet soon," I say and scratch his ears when he's had enough of playing. "Typically, parents start feeding pups regurgitated meat after eight to ten weeks."

Lou pauses in her work and looks back over her shoulder, frowning. "If you think I'm chewing up rabbits for Grey, you're mistaken," she says firmly. "Feel free to do that yourself."

"Maybe!" I reach out to stretch my arms and fish out the cigarettes from the breast pocket of my linen shirt. I look at Lou

against the light. She hasn't turned back, but is looking straight at me. Her face is shadowed and the sun is shining on her hair from behind. Her eyes shimmer like two drops of blue oil. There's something in her eyes, but it's not disgust. It is gentle and calm, maybe even curious. A shiver runs through me and makes my heart flutter. In that moment, I know I would do anything for her. Everything except one thing: let her go. I believe more and more that it could work with us. And more and more I want to know who Lou really is.

For a split second, I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't kidnapped her. Would we have explored Sequoia National Park together and decided to spend the summer side by side? Could it have been more? Would I have met the Lou she used to be? Have I lost that Lou forever?

Why have I never asked myself all these questions?

I put the cigarette in my mouth without taking my eyes off Lou and carefully retrieve my lighter from the top pocket of my cargo pants. Grey doesn't mind and continues to relax on my lap.

Of course, I know the answer: because my flashes would have ruined everything anyway. It would never have worked. If it hadn't worked out in Ash Springs, why in Lodgepole or anywhere else? I'm sick, a normal life is out of the question for me. Groups of people scare me and every smell can be a trigger. The way I'm sitting here now, I can hardly imagine it. For the first time in ages, I think I feel like a normal person should feel. Real. Genuine. I have real feelings. I can laugh, be happy, get angry about small things. I can grin and scoff. I'm no longer the ghost that used to roam the winter in solitude, not knowing if it's already a part of the wilderness or not.

And I owe it all to the girl I kidnapped.

Her gaze, which has been fixed on my face this whole time, wanders down to my fingers.

"What are you going to do when you run out of cigarettes?" she suddenly asks out of the blue. "Or a way to light a fire?"

I smile even though I'm suspicious. I don't think her interest has anything to do with my needs as we haven't gotten that far yet. "I can also make fire using two stones, don't worry," I explain. "But I

do have enough spare gas with me. As for the cigarettes…" I stare at her until she looks away and goes back to studying the cloth. "Shouldn't your question be: When will you have to go to a supermarket again?" I light the cig. Normally, her feigned interest would have infuriated me, but today nothing can faze me.

Lou is silent and I watch as the smoke blowing in her direction envelops her.

"It's not good for Grey," she says dismissively, waving the smoke away with one hand.

"He won't get lung cancer," I reply nonchalantly. "Wolves don't get that old."

Lou carefully pulls the cloth across the lake and the splashing joins that of the waterfall.

"So, when will you have to go to the supermarket again?" she asks casually after a while.

I happily puff on the cigarette. "Not at all if I put my mind to it."

"What?"

The subtle horrific undertone in *what* somewhat annoys me now. "We have meat and wild herbs. Spruce needles for tea. There are also raspberries, blueberries, and rosehips," I say, pointing toward the forest. "Not far from here is a wild meadow with edible berries you've probably never heard of. In winter, we don't need a freezer for the meat as it's cold enough to store outside. Incidentally, you can even eat the bast layer of many trees, which is basically the moist layer between the wood and the bark. Did you know that?"

Lou swallows. "What about toilet paper, pads, and soap?" she asks faintly.

"You can use fabric and nature instead. In the past, people made do without such luxuries."

"And water?"

I point to the shimmering water. "Fresh water. It's everywhere here."

Lou wrings out the towel and I see her trying hard to remain calm. "So, you're saying we can drink this water?" she wants to know.

I shrug. "I already have."

"What about bacteria?"

She won't let it go. I have no idea what she's insinuating. "There might be some, but we can just as easily boil the water if you prefer. I also have stacks of disinfectant tablets."

Lou is pale around the tip of her nose. "I haven't seen them yet," she murmurs and fishes the cloth out of the water.

I smile at her. "We've had no need for them yet. I have a few gallons of water left in the storage tank."

Lou stands up abruptly, ties the ends of the scarf together and puts it around her like I showed her. She vigorously pulls it around until the wet spot is on her back.

"May I have Grey?" she asks, stretching out her arms.

"Sure." I put him straight into her hands.

She carefully stows him in the cloth and I can only see his outline. He wriggles in it like a child in the womb. When he doesn't stop, Lou bravely reaches down into the depths of the wrap and ends his struggles with a smile. He was probably lying on his back like a beetle.

When she looks up again, her face is serious. "I know how you found me," she says seamlessly, her face impassive.

The realization completely throws me off-balance. Not the fact that she finally figured it out, but that she hasn't revealed it until now. "Did you figure it out from the photos in the newspaper?" It's the only logical explanation because in the first picture, she was wearing the coral-colored blouse—the same kind I bought for her later. She must have made a connection between the photos and put two and two together.

Her nod confirms my guess.

"Good." She deduces better than I thought.

Watch out!

The voice that has been silent for a long time echoes in my head. She didn't let on, she's a good actress. Maybe I should chain her again.

"I don't want to talk to you about it," Lou says, interrupting my train of thought. She looks down at Grey briefly, as if to collect herself. "How long were you preparing for my kidnapping?" she asks

cautiously as if afraid I might freak out. “When did you realize you were going to do it?”

Now she looks into my eyes more steadily than ever. Seems like she’s mesmerizing me with that northern-sky blue.

“I wanted you. All to myself. Forever,” I hear myself say and it sounds distant in my ears. As far away as my self from back then feels. “Once I’d made up my mind, I started preparing. I thought about what I consumed during an ordinary summer in the wilderness and instead of merely doubling it, I multiplied it by a number you wouldn’t like.” We’re still looking at each other. “I included what girls need, plus what we need in winter. In the coming months, I’m sure I’ll discover I’ve forgotten a few things—but it is not the end of the world if I have to go get something.”

“So, when did you decide to kidnap me?” She blinks unsurely.

A squirrel jumps from branch to branch above us and I take a few breaths to look around. I can’t believe it was in this vibrant place where the cold *404 Not found* message left me so devastated. These are the same trees, the same air, the same sky and yet there is a huge difference between back then and now. There’s Brendan on the cliff in the past and then he is on the other side in an unfamiliar future. I feel like I’m walking a tightrope that spans an abyss, not having made it to the other side yet. I can still fall, plunge, fail. Though I can barely make out the Brendan on the other side, many more steps on the rope and fog lie between us.

I look at Lou, who is still waiting for an answer.

“You suddenly disappeared from the platform,” I say quietly. “It felt like you left me. I couldn’t allow that.”

“I had to log off Facebook. My brother made me.”

Ethan, I think immediately. Of course that I did not know. Strangely enough, my resentment, that nagging jealousy I always felt when it came to her brothers is gone.

“You wouldn’t have kidnapped me if you had been able to keep watching me on Facebook?” Lou asks.

I wish she would stop. It’s too crazy, I don’t want to confront her about it. On the other hand: I kidnapped her, that’s a fact. Why shouldn’t she know the whole truth?

I step toward her as if to demonstrate my goodwill, but Lou completely misunderstands. She dodges me and smacks her back against a tree trunk.

"Don't come any closer, please…" The helplessness in her voice is unmistakable. The pulse in her throat twitches.

I immediately back away, not wanting her to be afraid of me again. "You can't look at it that way, Louisa," I answer gently. Truth means closeness, which Lou is probably not ready for yet. "There was another matter, a little while ago, that gave me the idea in the first place."

"Which was?" Her face is tense as a spruce branch repeatedly brushes against her cheek in the wind.

I shake my head. "I'm not going to tell you when you're too scared to breathe." I nod toward the RV. "It's time we head back and get the food ready. That is if you still want to."

Trembling as she takes Grey out of the sling and clutches him to her chest, I feel a queasy feeling in my heart. I can convince myself and wish for many things, but it will take Lou a long time to get used to me. And she will mourn for a long time. I can't say for how long. As I try to remember my own grief, all I find is a big black hole in my soul. A hole like a trapdoor to a dark room.

You won't be able to stand it, the boy whispers to me from his hiding place when I suddenly see him standing in front of me with his close-cropped hair and dirty pants. He raises his hands defensively as I look at him. *You can't come in. Too dangerous.*

CHAPTER 20

It's almost dark when I start the pasta water. In late July in the Yukon, this means it's after ten o'clock at night.

I get a jar of pickled garlic cloves and a cutting board from an upper cupboard and unhook the matching knife from my belt.

Inconspicuously, I look at Lou who is sitting at the table slicing sundried tomatoes. Every now and then, she glances at Grey who is sniffing my fleece sweater.

"We still have to roast some pine nuts," it suddenly occurs to me as I'm about to open the jar with the garlic cloves.

Lou stands up startled, her bells jingling. "Shall I get them?" she immediately asks. It seems a little too spontaneous to me.

"They're in a cardboard box in the storage compartment, all the way up front. It's labeled *Kitchen 5*," I say, eyeing her carefully.

"Okay." She nods a little too hasty.

Watch out!

As if not doubting her intentions, I unclip the key to the storage compartment from my belt. So nonchalantly that I deserve a pat on the back for it, I put it in her hand without saying anything more.

Lou disappears into the gray-green twilight. I stay in the RV, stop, and listen to the bells jingling. It moves around the RV with Lou. Okay, so she's really going to the back. I grab the glass and open it with a hard jerk. I skewer a clove with my fork and listen

again. Ah, she is unlocking the compartment. What if she runs off into the dark in spite of the bells?

If a flashback knocks me out, I won't be able to catch her. Then she would be alone in the wilderness. I'm not even all that worried she'll find the road and hitchhike from there to the nearest police station. Instead, I'm more afraid she might get lost in the Yukon and freeze to death during the night. Even on the unpaved forest road, it is incredibly far to the highway.

For a moment, it is dead quiet apart from the bubbling of the boiling water. I can no longer hear the bells jingling.

What is she doing?

In the night, the loud hoot of an owl rings out three times.

Quietly, I hook the knife to the carabiner and walk out as silently as if I was hunting. I creep around the RV and breathe a sigh of relief when I spot Lou in front of the open storage compartment. For a few seconds, I feared she had done something stupid. I'm relieved to see her not rummaging around in another box either, but actually in the one I told her about.

Wordlessly, I remain alongside the RV. I know she'll jump when she turns around, but despite her confidence and her growing ease, I don't want her to forget that I'm watching her. Always. Even when she's not aware of it.

I watch as she closes the box, pine nuts in hand, slams the compartment door shut, and locks it neatly.

She turns and flinches.

"You were taking quite a long time," is all I say.

She stares at me as if I'm going to sedate her again, but then I see her shake off her shock with a short sigh of relief. "I rummaged around in the box a bit." She pointedly shows me the packet of pine nuts and hands me the key.

"I just wanted to make sure you got the right box." With gallant exaggeration, I wave her in front of me and she passes me with stiff strides.

Was she thinking about making a run for it? Is that why it took her so long? Was she debating with herself? *Run! Stay here! Run?*

Did she actually consider it? But then why did she stay? Because of the darkness or because of Grey?

Today, of all days, the black flies are a plague and we eat in the RV despite having made other plans. Lou has Grey on her lap and is eating her noodles in silence, but I notice her wolfing them down. For the first time, she seems to really enjoy it. It pleases me more than I thought and I keep watching her out of the corner of my eye. Something else I notice: her hands haven't trembled once.

When our eyes meet across the table, she smiles at me. Hardly noticeable, but it's a smile. A smile from Lou. I smile back, feeling like the most normal young man in the world right now.

Later, as I rearrange the logs for the campfire, Lou kneels beside me and reaches between us into the cloth bag holding the tinder.

"Should I?" she asks hesitantly, looking at me.

"Sure." I point to the small sticks and twigs I've arranged around the thick logs. "Add the birch bark and the fire will burn twice as fast."

Lou pulls a few pieces of bark out of the bag and awkwardly spreads them around the dry twigs.

"Instead of birch bark, you can also use dry grass, dandelion seeds, or silver thistle seeds," I explain to her. "You can start a fire without tinder, but you definitely need dry branches and twigs. It's difficult using only logs." I nod to her. "I think that'll do."

Without saying anything, she withdraws her hand and watches me set fire to the tinder under a layer of dead aspen branches. Acrid smoke immediately billows and the first bright red flames lick upwards. "The light color comes from the birch bark. It contains essential oils and burns almost like a rag dipped in kerosene."

Lou nods.

We watch the flames rise for a while, then I go in and grab two beers from the fridge. They're the last ones, so next time I want to drink alcohol, I'll have to switch to Canadian rye whiskey.

As if it were no big deal, I put one beer in Lou's hand and kick back in the camping chair. As I open the can and take my first sip,

Lou shifts in her chair a few times until she finds a suitable position with Grey on her lap. She opens the beer can and slips her free hand under the covers to Grey. For the first time, she is sitting relaxed with me by my fire.

"He's good for you," I say. "Grey. You smile more often now."

Instead of answering, she takes a sip of beer. It strikes me that she never mentioned in a post if she drinks alcohol. Probably not since she's only sixteen. Ethan must have kept an eagle eye on her because it's forbidden at her age and her eldest brother is certainly not one to turn a blind eye.

She sets the can down and gnaws her bottom lip. "I don't feel so alone anymore," she finally says, and it sounds like a confession.

It's strange to hear her say that. As if I were her friend. "I see." I nod. "I used to have a dog. His name was Blacky." *And with him, even hell was a better place*.

Lou looks me over in a way she's never done before. "I assume he was black," she says, and I detect a hint of mockery.

I shake my head. She's trying to tease me, that alone is a miracle. "No, he was a retriever mix," I reply. "He was every color except black." The monster called him Skyler, but he was always Blacky to me.

"So you've always been different." A statement, not a question.

"What do you mean?" I find myself stiffening, like I always do when it comes to myself and my past.

She takes another sip of beer and stares into the fire. "Well, anyone else would have called him Goldie or Brownie. Anyone else would have just asked me out at the visitor center instead of kidnapping me. I guess you know I wouldn't have said *no* then, right?"

"But I wanted more than a date," I say in a hoarse voice. *I wanted you forever.*

Lou takes a deep breath. "Why are you so afraid of being abandoned? Why do you get flashbacks at just the thought of losing someone?"

Pressure builds inside me, like a capped soda bottle being shaken. I don't want to talk about my past even though Lou

deserves to know something about me. I involuntarily clench my fingers tightly around the beer can and stare intently at the top with the narrow opening. "I can't talk about it." The words stumble out of me. Softly but decisively.

"You can't or won't?" I hear Lou ask. She sounds so open, so genuinely interested. Toward me of all people.

I can't, I should say, but I can't get the words out. The latch is locked. A silence ensues between us, in which the crackling of the fire seems twice as loud. A log bursts open and sparks fly into the night air and again the little owl, which I heard earlier, calls.

"Sometimes it's good to talk things out," Lou says after what seems like forever. "That's what has helped me many times."

I look inside myself, into the darkness, and catch a glimpse of the boy in his dirty pants. He sits huddled in the blackness of the closet, rocking back and forth. Back and forth. He's cold, he's hungry, his heart is blind and deaf. The smell of mold and wood oil fills my nose. Everything in me contracts.

"I can't." It's a whisper that comes out of me. As if I hadn't said that, but he, straight from the depths. My hand grips the can so tightly that it dents with a crack. "I've tried so many times."

Lou breathes slowly in and out through her nose as if forcing herself to have this conversation. Again, I wonder what happened the night of my flashback.

"Maybe you should say it to yourself first," she says softly. "Without anyone listening to you."

I close my eyes for a moment. "Good idea, but it doesn't work." I lift my head and smile at her. It feels like a spasm in the jaw, like biting into a lemon. "If I were to hear my voice naming these things for what they were, then it'd be…" I shake my head defensively, not wanting to continue but something inside me is forcing it out. "…like raping myself…like I'd break all my bones…crush myself until there's nothing left but a pile of ashes and dust… I'd be completely lost afterward." I pause, shocked at my unembellished words. I shake my head with a dull feeling in my stomach. How does Lou get me to say things I hardly think about?

For a long while I dare not look her way as if what I said was shameful. A weakness. I am ashamed. Of myself, of the world, of every single person. But this kind of shame is difficult to explain. With a deep breath, I also close my other hand around the beer can and cling to it with all my might. I'm ashamed that I was too weak to fight back, I'm ashamed of wetting my pants, the stench, the dirt and my cowardice. I'm ashamed of Jordan Price and myself for looking for food in the trash. I am ashamed for being nothing. And I'm ashamed that my parents let me down, that I'm not worth loving. And even if my mind understands that it was not my fault, my feelings say otherwise. *Weakling. Little shit. Bastard*. The words circle like blowflies in my mind, always.

"You said you'd be completely lost afterward," I hear Lou say quietly, "so who are you now? Who are you, Brendan?"

I lift my head. She sits there as before, stroking Grey's fluffy fur. Her gaze rests on my face, shy but open.

For a moment, I consider her question, glad for the distraction.

"I'm someone who knows my strengths as well as my weaknesses," I reply. At least that's how I thought of myself until recently, but now I don't know where the tightrope is taking me.

"So, what are your strengths?" she asks. "If you could name only three, what would they be?"

"Determination, control, strength." I know for sure.

"And what are your weaknesses?"

I'll think about it. "The opposite of them." It's more of a question.

Lou tilts her head. "Something like: indecisiveness, impotence, inferiority?"

I nod tentatively, not knowing what she's getting at yet.

"I guess you don't know how my brothers characterized me since I didn't post any of it on Facebook."

A smile creeps onto my face, mocking and disarming at the same time.

Lou ignores it. "Ethan says I'm shallow, useless, and difficult." She pauses as if I need time to sort through her words. "Jayden says I'm fun-loving, emotional, and insecure. It's all the same. It's just kind of light and dark sides of one and the same character trait."

I can't help but think of Lou's pictures on Facebook. My sun girl in the light. A bit naive, but fun-loving. *Everything's kind of easy for you, Lou, isn't it?*

I peer thoughtfully into the flames. Two flames encompass a log as if to embrace it. I recall what went through my head the other night. My theory about light and darkness and that the light cannot win. "Maybe you're right," I reply. "But the shadows are always stronger. As soon as you light a candle to chase them away, you give them new fuel. As if every glimmer of hope angers them…" There's still so much hate inside me. So much fear. At the moment, it seems to me that no one could ever illuminate my darkness. Not even Lou. "Isn't it funny how what's supposed to help you really shows you how weak you are?" I ask softly.

"Maybe the shadows are not stronger," Lou replies after a moment's thought. "Perhaps you can only see them better with the light. And what you see simply scares you. So you don't look. Maybe that's exactly what you should do."

An image comes to mind. Lou opens the door to the dark room and behind the crack stands the little boy. The more light falls within me, the more clearly I can see him. I feel more real, but it makes me vulnerable. And I'd like to keep the bolt locked forever.

As I smile at Lou, I feel a guilt that makes my heart heavy. "When you say that, it sounds so simple. That's exactly why I wanted you, Lou. You are like the light. Like a sun. You always looked so radiant in your photos as if life was easy. As if it could be easy, even for me. It seemed as if you wanted to demand everything from life without thinking of limits. You looked like you expected only the best out of life."

I don't know why I'm telling her this. Maybe because this girl finally deserves the truth. I was so obsessed with her at the time. To be honest, I didn't want to know who she was at all even though I may have convinced myself that I did. It should be like in the photos. That's the main reason I bought all the things. I wanted that feeling. I figured if she was here with me, it might rub off on me. Today, it seems insane to me that I ever thought that way.

Maybe it was a mistake to tell her, she probably wants to go back in right now, but when I look at her, she looks back.

"Did you figure that out from my photos?" She seems genuinely surprised.

"And from what you wrote."

"Then I truly was the perfect victim. I expected the best from you, too." She laughs bitterly.

The sound cuts into my gut. "I'm sorry. I certainly didn't want to take advantage of that… You are"—I falter, unable to think of anything original—"simply…extraordinary." *Fantastic!*

Lou seems to like it anyway. Her eyes are the deepest blue I've ever seen. "No one has ever called me that."

"That surprises me." I shake my head in disbelief. "I mean, you never met your mother and you lost your father early—sorry, yes, I know all that." I grin apologetically, and for the first time, it seems as if an inner smile echoes on her face. "Another would have complained about their hard fate of losing both parents," I continue and become serious again. "They would have used this as an excuse for any possible kind of failure, but you don't." And I'm only realizing all of this now that I'm telling her since I only wanted to see the fantasy image of her before.

Lou shrugs. "I have my brothers. They are my family. I've never wanted for anything."

"Yes, because you see it that way. The loss of your parents never discouraged you from living. You never missed anything."

She looks at me confused. "You're portraying me far too well. There was nothing to miss. Everyone has always taken care of me. I grew up in a house full of love. You're wrong about me."

"No. Definitely not. If there's anyone who loves life, it's you." Suddenly, I'm glad again that I kidnapped her because otherwise, I would never have met the other, strong Lou. But how can I be happy about doing something so bad and hating it at the same time? And how is it possible that Lou is sitting here with me and talking to me like it wasn't me who took her and kept her sedated for five days? Who puts her in chains and makes sure she doesn't leave?

Looking at Lou, I can see her sinking into her feelings, maybe thinking about what I said and getting sad.

I clear my throat to get her attention. "We shouldn't talk about this anymore today," I suggest, pointing at the sleeping wolf on Lou's lap. "It's Grey's big day, isn't it?"

She nods and seems grateful for the change of subject.

"Perhaps you would like to tell me the story to which he owes his name."

"You mean Jayden's story?" The most contradictory emotions are reflected on her face. Confusion, understanding, sadness.

Maybe the story wasn't such a good idea after all because now she must be thinking about her brother even more. I want to tell her it was stupid and thoughtless of me, but then she puts down the beer she has been sipping.

The bell bracelet around her wrist jingles, but Lou smiles. "Okay." She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. "The story is called *Grey*, but it's not about a wolf, it's about a Native American boy."

I feel irritated by her sudden kindness. Out of sheer nervousness, I light a cigarette and lean back in my chair.

"I'm not a good storyteller"—Lou looks at me a little apologetically—"but this one I know pretty much by heart."

"I don't remember ever being told a story, so I won't know if you tell it well or not, Lou." I nod encouragingly.

Lou nods back. She closes her eyes for several breaths and her facial features smooth out, glowing orange and soft in the light of the fire. As she begins to speak, she stares into the flames and her voice suddenly sounds as if she is far away.

"Many summers and winters before the white man's ships brought death to the Big Muddy River area, a small tribe of Lakota lived near the river valley."

I exhale the cigarette smoke and stretch out my legs.

"There were lush forests of tall white plane trees, stout maples, and horse chestnut trees as far as the eye could see. When there was a clearing, a carpet of red flowers would cover it, and in the Indian summer, all the trees shone like torches. The boy in this story wasn't born with red skin like all the Lakota, but with gray skin."

We look at each other, but Lou actually seems to be there, at Big Muddy River, which probably feels better to her than the Yukon.

"Truly, it was completely gray, pale gray like ash, not reddish like ripe cranberries. His mother called him *Delsin*, which means, he is like that."

"She didn't call him Grey even though that's the title of the story?" I interject dryly.

Lou reprimands me with a look. "No. She knew he'd never get a better name with the defect, and before the other kids called him *Dead Skin* or *Gray-Face*, she chose Delsin to show the others that she accepted him the way the Great Spirit had made him. Young Indians are allowed to choose a different name after a glorious feat, but she feared it would never come to that. Even as a five-year-old, his ashen skin made him look like an old man. Girls feared him and went into hiding whenever he came near them, whereas the boys excluded him and threw stones at him if he tried to join their games."

I swallow. "It's a sad story." It reminds me of my early days in the slums. After I passed the Bones' initiation test, I could have chosen a name. I didn't need to be Hoover anymore, but I didn't want any other name. I wanted mine. There was a time when I wanted nothing more than to know what my mother called me as if it would give me my old identity back. It would have been like I was no longer the bastard, the little shit, the weakling. But of course it didn't change anything.

Lou looks at me like she knows what's going on inside me. Her eyes shimmer in the fire like two deep lakes.

"When Delsin was six years old, his mother died while giving birth to his sister and he had no one left to love him," she continues. "Delsin's father, the head of the tribe, was ashamed of Delsin. He had wanted to drown him soon after birth, but the tribe's medicine man had prophesied that it would bring bad luck if he drowned his firstborn like a deformed dog. So, whenever warriors from a friendly tribe came by to plan battles and conduct negotiations, he would say to them, 'This is not my son. He was given to me by the Great Spirit and I must bow to his fate and raise him.'"

Like me, Delsin grew up like a bastard. Without friends. Isolated. I'm enveloped by darkness. I miss part of the story, but then I go back to focusing on Lou's voice, holding on to it like I did that night in the thunderstorm when I had my flashback.

"His sister, Alaska—meaning, where the sea breaks—avoided him too, afraid of also being ostracized by the others and of never having a man take her to his wigwam," I hear Lou say. "So, Delsin was left to his own devices and became a gray shadow, flitting like a ghost between the forest, the low willows, and the teepees. His father put a bowl of beans in front of the wigwam every day. Delsin only crept in to sleep and rose long before his father so he wouldn't offend his eyes, as he always said.

"At some point, Delsin himself began to believe he was only a shadow. A gray shade. And since the Lakota didn't talk to him, he went deep into the woods and started talking to the animals and plants. Eventually, as the sunny days lengthened, he simply did not return to the *Big Muddy River* camp. He lived for himself, but not alone. He spoke to the maples and plane trees, to owls and deer. Yes, he even spoke to the moon and the stars for he had many things to say, many things which he had heard and seen among the Lakota but did not understand."

The words continue pouring out of Lou, creating a bubble around us. It's only Lou and I and the fleeting images her words create.

"He confessed everything under the skies—on the peaks of green-gray hills far from the forest, where his words soared high and wove pictures in the sky. He called the moon his *yellow friend in the black sea* and he gave shimmering names to the brightest stars that glittered in the mouth and palate just by saying them."

"What were those names?" I demand, surfacing for a moment as if to catch my breath. It almost seems to me that the inside of my mouth is tingling like after a spoonful of fizzy water.

"I had asked Jayden the same back then." Lou smiles. "He said he knew the names but couldn't write them down or say them. They were too beautiful. His letters would shatter like glass if he tried. To Delsin these stars he named were like drops of silver pressed into the sky by the Great Spirit. And sometimes, in the most secret of

dreams, he wished his skin was the color of the stars. Silver instead of gray." She looks at me conspiratorially through the darkness. "At the time, I hated Jayden for not telling me the names."

I laugh because her confession somehow makes us allies. When I get serious again, I notice her watching me. There's something in her eyes that reminds me of our first encounter at the visitor center. A mixture of fascination and curiosity. Back when she was observing me across the shelves, clutching the can of bear spray like a lifeline. Back when I would have had the opportunity to write a different future for us.

I swallow again and Lou suddenly seems hopelessly lost. Disoriented, she blinks, then looks into the rising, dark smoke and hastily carries on talking.

"He named the animals that came to him according to their temperament. And after living and talking with them for many, many winters, he could suddenly understand their language too… It must have been a significant morning for Delsin: waking up and hearing the forest full of whispers that he understood." Ours gazes meet again, but this time Lou is not distracted. "Indeed, Delsin felt as if he had awakened to a new world. He ate nuts with the squirrels, sang with the crickets and birds, and walked with the deer. And deep inside him he heard a voice saying: *This is you. This is your place*. No one laughed at him here, no one stared at him. Every animal spoke to him. At night, he would listen to the stars play, watch his yellow friend the moon, and thank the Great Spirit for finally being home." She pauses, petting Grey.

"Is that the end?" I ask. It would be a good ending to a sad story, but I want Lou to keep talking. She has never spoken for so long at a time.

I'm relieved when she shakes her head.

"The story goes on," she explains calmly. "As I said, several winters and summers had passed."

Excited, I lean back.

"Delsin could have been happy. But eventually, he started longing for a mate." Another look from Lou darts over to me, shy and fragile. "He wandered back to his tribe's summer camp, but stayed hidden in

the bushes. It seemed everyone there had completely forgotten about him. Nobody talked about him, nobody spoke his name. His father and sister went happily about their daily business. He crept back, head hanging, when he passed the narrow creek that was a tributary of the *Big Muddy River* and encountered a few young Indian girls drawing fresh water with their wooden buckets. Delsin froze. He spent several days hiding without them noticing him. One, in particular, appealed to him. She always came later than the others and stayed longer. Her name was Istu. That means sugar. Everything about her was sweet. From her full mouth to her straight black hair and shapely breasts, just big enough to fit perfectly in Delsin's hands. After a few days spent as if in a trance, he returned to the forest. Forgetting the moon and the stars and the animals, he wished more than ever that he wasn't Delsin. Not to be *like* that! To be different. To bear a name worthy of Istu. But he knew with all his heart that day would never come. He withdrew, grieved for something he could never have, and grew angry with the Great Spirit. The animals came to comfort him, but in his anger he pushed them away. He renounced his friendship with the moon and from then on was alone again. Another gray, lonely shadow."

Like me. A faded ghost in the solitude of the Yukon.

"But then one morning when it was very cold, the hoot of an owl woke him. It cried about a mighty army of warriors approaching from the north in an attempt to attack the Lakota tribe. When Delsin heard this, his heart was filled with fear. He thought of Istu's sweet lips as well as her breasts. He rushed back, a few does at his side telling him the enemy's plans as they had overheard them during the night. The enemy tribe wanted to encircle the village and raze it to the ground in a single battle. They wanted to steal the winter supplies and keep only the unmarried girls alive.

"Delsin burned with anger when he heard this and ran even faster. He traveled for three days and three nights. When he arrived at his village, no one believed him. They formed a circle around him and pushed him around and laughed at him. His father's friend, Istu's father, even wanted to kill him. In his eyes, Delsin had come to bring misfortune upon them all. He stated that maybe Delsin himself

might have betrayed their encampment to the army—as revenge for ostracizing him. But his daughter, Istu, stood in front of Delsin and protected him from her father with her arms wide open. In that moment, Delsin realized that Istu's name transcended her sweet lips. She managed to get the Lakota to listen to him. His father wanted proof of his ability to talk to animals, so Delsin talked to a lame horse and immediately found out the reason for its limp. It had a purulent hoof ulcer, caused by a stone that had gotten stuck in it that was not visible from the outside. The Lakota were stunned. Delsin provided further evidence and the tribe was filled with respect because none of their own had ever spoken to the animals before. They began setting traps and moving their supplies to safety. Women and children were housed with a neighboring tribe, which in turn, provided them with a number of young warriors. So it happened that the enemy army found an empty village and was surrounded.

"Not a single Lakota died, but all enemies fell. It was like a miracle.

"That evening, as the autumn sun reddened the few leaves on the trees, Delsin's father came and knelt before him. 'I have always denied that you were my son,' he said heavily. 'And I was right. I'm not worthy to be your father. Someone like you comes from the Great Spirit. Today, you saved our tribe. Without you, we would have been lost.' With those words, everyone else fell to their knees and bowed their heads.

"Delsin's father said: 'From today on you shall no longer be called Delsin, son of the Great Spirit, but Silver. Because what is gray? Gray is silver that does not shine. But today you shone, Silver, all of us saw it.'

"Delsin had tears in his eyes, but he wasn't ashamed. He pulled his father to his feet and said aloud, 'My name is Delsin: he is like that. If I were not like that, I would never have learned the language of animals and you would have been lost, understand? It was only because I am the way I am that I was able to save you. My mother chose that name well.'

"And so Delsin kept his name. A month later, he married on the banks of the *Big Muddy River*, now called the Missouri, Istu, whose heart was even sweeter than her mouth or breasts."

Lou falls silent and this time I instinctively know it must be the end of the story. I float in the bubble created by Lou as if in timeless space. Images of the wild Lakota, the glittering stars, and the gray-skinned boy float past me like memories. Good memories of which there are so few. Memories Lou gave me. I feel like I'm in a river where I would like to be carried along forever. Along with Delsin and his father's words: Gray is silver that does not shine. I repeat the sentence in my head, but the more I say it to myself, the darker and heavier I feel. Out of reflex, I reach for the coin on my bracelet. A strange numbness rises from my stomach to my throat and settles there. I swallow the lump, only thinking how much I craved words of appreciation as a child. Or for a father's smile, a kind pat on the back, arms to hold and protect me.

I don't want to feel like this.

Too dangerous.

The images of the Lakota fade the longer I sit by the fire. At some point, I feel the coolness of the night air on my neck and hear the crackling and cracking of the fire. Smoke billows in erratic gusts from right to left, biting my nose. In the forest, perhaps even near the cliffs, the wolves howl their dark, plaintive song.

I look at Lou. Her face is still at ease, her posture relaxed. I hope it has been good for her to share Jayden's story with me. Maybe I should ask her to tell me about her life more often. Maybe she can cope better that way.

Before she senses me watching her, I peer into the darkness of the trees and listen to the wolves howling. Suddenly, Lou starts giggling next to me.

"There's nothing there, Grey," she scolds affectionately.

I turn to both of them. Grey cocks his head in the air and licks Lou's fingers, which she generously offers him. He must have woken up to the howling of his own kind.

"Stay with him, I'll go make the milk." I get up and am about to go to the RV when I pause for a moment and look at her.

"What is it?" Lou looks up.

"Gray is silver that does not shine. He's the same, like the light and dark sides of the same thing. Is that why you told me the story?" I had been thinking about it earlier while I was trapped in her dreamy bubble.

Lou looks at me in amazement. "I told it because you wanted me to. If I had wanted to insinuate something with this story, I would have added that Delsin kidnapped Istu when she was fetching water."

"And how would the story have ended then?"

Lou tilts her head. "I have no idea. That would depend on Delsin."

I raise an eyebrow with a thousand words on the tip of my tongue that don't add up, so I keep quiet even though I'm dying to hear her answer. I quickly collect the beer cans and return to the RV to boil milk.

Would Istu have loved Delsin if he had set her free?

In the warmth of the RV, I put the kettle on the stove, turn on the gas, and do the dishes while I'm waiting for the water to boil. I can't get Lou's words out of my mind.

That would depend on Delsin.

What was she insinuating? Why was she looking at me like she did back in Lodgepole? Has she rediscovered the Brendan she thought she saw in me back then? And if so, why?

Didn't you expect something like this? I hear a voice inside me ask.

Isn't that what you wanted? Didn't you also long to be near the monster because you were so lonely?

A chill creeps up my spine. Maybe Lou feels something like affection because she has no choice. The thought that used to give me hope suddenly sickens me.

But at the visitor center she looked at you like she liked you. She went with you. *Don't you remember how her eyes sparkled?*

A deafening beep rips me out of my reverie and startles me. A plate slips from my hands and lands with a crash in the sink.

"Fucking shit!" I look around frantically for a second. The flame under the kettle forms its usual blue ring, there is no smoke.

"What's going on?" Lou calls out, alarmed from outside.

I use the shrill beeping to orient myself. It comes from above. The smoke detector blinks red. I switch it off with a hand and the sudden silence is eerie.

"Only the smoke alarm!" I call to Lou, laughing with relief. "At first I thought it was the propane alarm."

"What would you have done then?"

"I would have turned off the gas bottle while you ran for safety."

Luckily, it wasn't the propane alarm. A gas tank leak is about the worst thing that can happen. Not only is it extremely dangerous, it would also deplete the gas supply relatively quickly. In the end, I might have to travel to a city again.

"Where is the gas bottle? Just in case you're not around if the alarm goes off?" Lou calls now from outside.

"The bottle is in a compartment on the other side of the RV. About level with the side door." I allow myself a grin. "I don't want you messing with it though. Or you might blow us up!"

The kettle whistles and I prepare the milk for Grey. It reminds me of what I was thinking of earlier.

If Lou truly starts to like me, I should be content no matter the reason.

Through the side door, I glance at Lou sitting by the fire, hunched over and speaking to Grey. A gust of wind brushes my face. Like the Santa Ana wind, only cooler. For a few heartbeats, everything blurs and all I can see are the teddy bears swaying in the wind in front of the billowing curtains on Thorson Ave.

Father, mother, child. The perfect family.

That's what I wished for. No matter for what reasons, Lou will eventually fall in love with me.

So why does it seem so pathetic to me now?

CHAPTER 21

The weather is really heating up in the next few days. It's the hottest summer I've ever experienced in the Yukon. Even the chipmunks, which normally scurry through the undergrowth all day long, lie flat like pancakes in the shade of the trees and the blueberries are drying up on the bushes.

I don't know what happened to Lou and I after Jayden's story, but something is different. Maybe it's the way Lou looks at me. With shy curiosity. More than once, I have caught her watching me out of the corner of her eye—and then quickly looking away as if I've caught her doing something illegal.

The thought of pleasing her tingles like heat in my veins. I've held back my desire for her for too long. Looking back, I can't understand how I managed to not constantly think about how she would feel in my hands. The images that pop into my head confuse me. If she looks at me like that again, I won't be able to think straight for an hour. My logical thinking frays into a heap of useless streaks and becomes a dream of bodies entwined on brown earth, lit by coppery sunlight filtering through the dense treetops. I smell the intense scent of the spruces, feel the prickling carpet of needles on my skin, feel Lou.

At some point, I admit to myself that I want her, even physically. Now that she's losing her fear, a thousand times more than before.

The dark burning in my chest has given way to another feeling. It's a bit like floating.

Sometimes, I wake up in the morning and feel like I've fallen out of my old life; I think it should hurt, I must have broken all my bones, but feel like a newborn caribou calf taking its first unsteady steps. It takes me a while to realize that I'm happy in a strange way.

Ever since Lou told me Jayden's story, we've been spending most days together.

We have breakfast in the RV, and while I clean up and do the dishes, Lou watches reruns of *Hero of the Week*. Every once in a while, I tease her about the show's pseudo-heroic crap and she replies that I'm simply jealous of the attention the heroes receive. I can only laugh at that because the only attention I want is hers, but I haven't said that out loud in a long time.

In the mornings, she often offers to help. She accompanies me to the lake and together we wash our dirty jeans and T-shirts. We kneel side by side on the bank, arms up to our elbows in the water, while Grey frolics around us, preferably biting one of my freshly washed clothes. Sometimes, I think he does it on purpose because he wants to annoy me. I'm afraid one day I'll have to vie with him for Lou's favor.

At lunchtime, we decide together what to cook for dinner, no, usually Lou decides and I merely nod. The main thing is that she eats. Afterward, we spend two hours in the RV, especially on days when the air between the spruce trees and the deadwood shimmers with heat.

Nowadays, I seldom see Lou standing around anymore, clutching her necklace and pendant as if it was the anchor to her past.

However, despite my happiness, I don't trust the peace. It's going too well. From time to time, I wonder if Lou is deceiving me and secretly plotting to stab me in the back, strangle me, or whatever she thinks she can do to me. I don't want to test her, but I also know that one misstep from her could ruin everything like a card removed from the bottom of a house of cards.

I dread that moment. The bad thing is I don't know how I will react. I still don't trust myself, I don't know enough about the new

Brendan because that part is still foreign to me.

In the morning, Grey's pathetic whine wakes me up. In the bunk above the driver's cab, I sit up and, bleary-eyed, look down the aisle. Lou has left the folding door open and I spot Grey, who has tumbled out of his blanket lair and is sucking on the corner of the blanket.

I quickly climb down, sneak barefoot to the back, and pluck Grey from the down comforter with one hand.

Carefully, I set him down on my fleece sweater on the seat and regret a little that this sweater will probably never be anything other than Grey's daytime sleeping place. The pup looks up at me with his beady eyes and then crawls awkwardly under one sleeve, whimpering.

"You're cold too, aren't you?" I look out the window. A thin fog hangs like a veil between the trees and the sky is dusky gray. It's five thirty at most. I quickly pull my sleep shirt over my head, throw it on Grey for fun, and slip into my clothes.

Grey starts whining again. My shirt comes to life and moments later his little head peeks out from under the top. "It's okay. I'm on it." Watching him, I fill the kettle with water and pour the powder into the measuring cup. It occurs to me that I left the scissors on the tabletop last night.

Lou didn't say anything about it, but maybe she didn't notice. It's the first time I haven't locked away a sharp tool immediately after use other than the knives on my belt.

It only takes me a second to decide. I quietly disappear into the bathroom and deposit the scissors in the mirror cabinet. I'm wondering all the time if Lou is planning something; maybe this is how I'll find out.

Something in me makes me do it.

It's now eight o'clock and I've made coffee and toasted frozen pancakes. Grey hangs lengthways across my forearm and is drinking his second portion of milk of the day. His stomach bulges like an

inflated balloon. As I wonder if he has had enough, the RV rocks gently—a sure sign that Lou is moving in the bed.

"Hey!" I look up to see her sitting on the mattress, staring in my direction.

Has she been watching me for a while?

She blinks a few times and rubs her sleep-reddened cheeks. Two strands of hair stick out from her head—it looks funny, a bit like a clown.

I put down Grey's milk pouch, take the key on the table next to me, and toss it to her on the bed without comment. For a while, I used to unlock her bonds in the morning, but over time it felt like I was her personal jailer.

Lou opens the shackle and disappears into the bathroom. She's rarely talkative this early in the morning and it's best to leave her alone until she's had at least one cup of coffee.

The RV sways back and forth again. I don't know exactly what she's doing in the bathroom, but she's definitely not on the toilet. It's also not the first time the whole RV rocks like a ship in a storm once Lou has closed the door behind her. A few days ago, I thought about setting up a camera. Maybe she's trying to crawl up the walls and get out through the hatch in the roof, but a camera in the bathroom would be wrong on so many levels.

At some point, I hear the water rushing and the RV's plumbing gurgling like intestines, and shortly afterward, the door swings open. "Could you give me a pair of scissors?" Lou asks, like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"For what?" I stand up with Grey in my arms. It's funny that she's asking for them today of all days.

"I want to even out my hair."

I think I hear veiled reproach in her words. "Look in the cabinet."

Truth or pretense?

Lou closes the door behind her, leaving me to ponder.

I was asking for this, though nothing can happen. She's hardly going to overpower me, just the thought of Lou threatening me with nail scissors is rather pathetic. What about her though? Would she

do anything to herself? Then again, she has seemed a lot less desperate this past week.

Before I can stop myself, I sneak to the bathroom door and listen. The fine, high-pitched sound of hair being cut can be heard through the gap between door and floor.

Truth.

I breathe a sigh of relief and hug Grey who is still hanging down from my arm to my stomach.

"You've had enough for now or you'll get a stomach ache again and cry our ears full." I use two fingers to grab the almost empty bag of milk from the table and throw it into the garbage under the sink. That's when I notice water sloshing around my used cup.

"The gray-water tank is full," is the first thing Lou tells me when she emerges from the bathroom and joins me at the table with a full cup of coffee.

When Grey discovers Lou, he begins to fidget. "I know. I noticed the water standing in the sink." I hand Grey to her across the table and he immediately licks her face. Giggling, she puts him on her lap.

I stealthily scrutinize her. Her hair is now all one length, falling slightly below her chin.

"Looks good what you did to your hair," I say. Cutting it with my hunting knife was practical, but it made it look rather wild.

"I just cut off the tips." Lou reaches to where a fringe used to be, but there's nothing there. She was thorough.

I suppress the urge to grab her hair and ruffle it. She's wearing her light blue sleep shirt that makes her eyes shine brightly. As a matter of fact, they sparkle and are no longer so cloudy. When she realizes I'm watching her, she suddenly smiles.

"Shall I empty the tank after coffee?" she asks, stretching the smile a little too far. It looks fake.

Watch out! screams the voice inside me.

Shut up, replies the part of me that wants to believe Lou. I start to nod deliberately.

"I'll show you which lever to pull," I say, making it absolutely clear that I'll come along.

"I could also take the buckets to the stream. I feel strong enough."

Damn it! When she looks at me like a lamb, I can hardly refuse her anything and she knows it!

"Alone?" I ask anyway, just as innocently as she looks at me.

She shrugs and bites her lip.

"Give an inch, take a mile syndrome, I assume." With a short snort, I stand up and eye her from above. I would never let her go to the lake alone. "Did you put the scissors back or are you going to use them on my neck later?"

Lou crosses her arms over her chest. "I put them back. You can check the cabinet."

"I'll do that later—assuming you let me live that long." I can't resist a bit of ridicule. I grab two white cable ties from my stash in the kitchen cupboard and start threading the bells on them like glass beads. After every bell, I look at Lou, and every time our eyes meet but before I can interpret it, she looks away.

I feel like the air is supercharged with a buzz and my mouth gets dry. The next time I look at Lou, her cheeks are flushed and she's fidgeting in the seat, making the upholstery creak. She hastily puts a piece of pancake in her mouth.

"Done." I've threaded the last bell, seven in total per zip tie. Like every morning as I place the bells on Lou, she alternates arms while eating like it's no big deal. Maybe that's her way of coping with it. I step directly in front of the bench. Carefully, I put the straps around her small wrists and pull them as tight as necessary. Lou's hands are shaking.

I look at her face again, holding the end of the second cable tie a moment longer than I have to. My fingers tingle and the strange feeling of reality merging with my dreams makes reality falter.

Why is she so nervous? Is it possible that she suddenly wants me? Does she feel more for me?

There's a rushing in my head like the wind blowing through the trees and it sounds like I'm at the ocean. I pull my hand back and brush the back of Lou's hand. Goose bumps run down her bare arm.

My heart is pounding.

Lou swallows and avoids eye contact, though she's stroking Grey with trembling hands.

"Lou?" I whisper.

"What?"

"You shouldn't try to run away again."

Her face darkens in the blink of an eye. "I am not planning to," she whispers.

Oh, yes, you are, sweet Lou!

I reach under her chin and pull her head up so she has to look at me.

"I don't mean that kind of escape," I say harshly. Wherever I touch her, my skin burns like fire. Lou's pupils dilate like I've put belladonna in her eyes. I feel like everything inside me sinks into my stomach and explodes in hundreds of salvos of fire. I want to kiss her. Now. Her lips are wet and shiny. *Just do it!* a voice inside me screams, but I'm frozen, unable to breathe, like I suddenly have cement in my lungs. And the longer Lou looks at me, the more I see her doubts grow. There's a kind of fear gathering in the blue of her eyes that I've never seen.

"You said you wouldn't touch me like…that…" she whispers breathlessly.

I feel her pulse pounding against my fingertips, it takes me a heartbeat to realize I'm still holding her.

I withdraw my hand in a haze and every finger tingles. For seconds, time seems trapped around us, locked in a vacuum. I return Lou's shimmering gaze, which is so much more than fear of me.

But what else should she be afraid of?

I mechanically shake my head, unable to find a quick answer.

Lou starts eating again, but her shoulders are hunched.

What's with you, Lou? I want to shout. *Why are you looking at me like you want to kiss me and crawl away from me at the same time?*

Her hands grip Grey's fur and her whole body trembles. Whatever just happened between us scared and upset her.

I retire outside to give her the time she needs.

While Lou showers, I collect salmonberries and rose hips from around the RV without ever taking my eyes off the side door. I'll be making a fruit wine with the salmonberries in the next few days and we can either eat the rose hips raw or I'll show Lou how to make jam out of them. I keep thinking back to that moment, Lou's dilated pupils. That couldn't have been an act. Not that! I doubt everything else, but there's no way she can consciously provoke such a physical reaction.

Maybe her feelings for me aren't an illusion after all. Whereby—maybe pupils dilate even when love is imaginary. Is *imagining* even the right word?

When my bowls are full, I still haven't found answers to my questions. I go in and set them on the counter before calling to Lou through the closed folding door that I'll be waiting for her outside by the drainpipe.

Five minutes later, I've opened the flap and put a bucket under the silver pipe when she comes out in jeans and a yellow lacy blouse.

From the intense way she's holding Grey in her arms and avoiding eye contact, I take it she's still embarrassed. Or unsure. I pretend not to notice and inspect the hook I used to fasten the flap with exaggerated care.

Lou kneels next to me and sets Grey down on the ground between us. If the putrid stench of highway rest stop bathrooms disgusts her, she doesn't show it. I'm about to start when Grey grabs my shoelace like it's a slowworm.

"Hey, little one!" I nudge him in the side to show him who's in charge, but he doesn't care. With his ears laid back, he stalks me and sinks his little teeth into the button on my pants pocket. Lou chuckles.

Sighing, I pull him away and growl at him darkly. With a plaintive sound, he jumps to Lou and tucks in his tail.

"We've got to start raising him or he'll think he's the alpha," I tell Lou. Not that he's going to side with her and attack me one day in an attempt to defend her.

"Can we even keep him?" Lou asks, watching Grey, who pretends the little argument between us never happened.

I shrug. "Sure, why not? Wolves behave like dogs when they grow up with humans."

"Won't he want to go back one day? He hears the wolves in the woods." Lou watches the pup and appears deep in thought.

"Of course that can happen. Although it's questionable if the pack would accept him. Maybe one day, he'll disappear into the woods and never come back." I say it nonchalantly, but the prospect of losing Grey sickens my stomach. He's been a link between Lou and me, and if he were to run off, it would be a bad omen; at least that's how I see it.

I push the thought away and show Lou which lever to pull to release the gray water. I explain to her again the difference between the capacity of the two tanks.

"Remember to shut the valve when the bucket is three-quarters full. It will take a while for the flow to stop."

She nods mechanically.

"Let's do it." I point to the pipe opening, which is the diameter of a coconut.

Lou leans forward a little and studies the two valves as if they were unpredictable mathematical equations. Lost in thought, she shakes her head and hesitantly grabs the front lever.

I don't know if it's a joke or if she actually wasn't listening to me. I wait a second too long to say *no*. Lou pulls on the lever and Grey lunges at me, grabbing my pants pocket a second time. Cursing, I push him away, knocking over the bucket with my elbow.

"Fucking shit!" I can't react fast enough. A dark brown fountain shoots out of the pipe and spills over my lap like a flood. It stinks of stale piss, chemicals, and shit. The stench paralyzes me and I watch as the liquid soaks me through and through. My black pants are growing heavy and turning brown.

Flashing lights hurl me back onto Thorson Ave, lying in the dark, arms pressed against a rigid body, thighs tucked up, but it's of no use.

Not these pictures, not now! Oh, God, not now! No flash!

I gasp and a splash of the liquid lands in my mouth. The foul taste explodes on my palate. My tongue burns and I reflexively throw myself to the side, landing on all fours, gagging a few times without throwing up.

With all my might, I force myself to breathe calmly like I did in the coffin at the very beginning for the first few minutes. In-out-in-out.

Everything's fine. Lou is still here. Grey is still here.

Everything's fine, Brendan. Calm down!

I spit on the ground a few times, but it doesn't help. Again, black dots dance in front of my eyes.

Look around, stay here!

I obey myself and look left and right before retching again.

Beside me, the shit flows like a stinking creature in the direction of the spruce tree line. Lou lies beyond it off to the side and Grey crouches on her stomach and howls at me like it's my fault.

I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand, spreading something disgustingly soft across it. In addition to disgust, anger is building up in my stomach.

"That was the wrong fucking lever!" I snap.

"I'm sorry," Lou gasps breathlessly.

I suppress the urge to vomit and convulse internally. I'd like to shout at her that it was an unlucky pull and that she should listen to me next time, when I notice a strange lump on the ends of her hair.

"You have shit in your hair!" I blurt out triumphantly, pointing vaguely at her head. "It looks too funny!" As soon as I say it, I feel something run down my cheek. I wipe it and look at my fingers. Poop brown.

I look again at Lou, lying next to the caustic sludge. Grey is still wailing indignantly. Something trembles inside me. Deep in my stomach, again and again. My shoulders shrug.

I don't understand right away, but sounds I've never heard me make come out of my throat like choppy air pumps. I laugh. More and more, until my abdomen hurts and I can't breathe anymore.

Eventually, I gag again, but then I continue laughing while Lou just stares at me like I've finally lost my mind. I don't know how to

stop, but after a while, the cramps in my stomach recede, the sounds stop, and I end up gasping for breath.

"You don't want to know about all the places you have it," I hear Lou interrupt the quietness flippantly.

A flock of blowflies circles around her head and suddenly I'm afraid I have to laugh again. I felt like I was losing control and I can't let that happen. To get rid of the feeling, I shake like a dog, look from Lou to Grey, and then to the fringe of pines.

"Race you to the lake!" I call out to Lou, abruptly jumping to my feet. With four long steps, I reach the trees and hear frantic ringing behind me. Lou took up the chase. I gasp and swear as I dash through ferns and trees in front of her, leaving a foul stench behind me.

Fully dressed, I jump into the water and my breath catches. The lake is freezing cold, not yet warmed by the midday sun. I dive a few feet along the sandy bottom and come to the surface with a snort.

"It's fucking cold!" I call out to Lou, who's standing on the bank with Grey in her arms. Taking a breath, I lower myself under the water again, rub both hands through my hair and feel the thick sludge dissolving. When I resurface, Lou is kneeling on the shallow bank, leaning her head down to dip her hair in the water. Of course, she can't swim and doesn't dare go in the water. However, the lake isn't all that deep, so there is no danger.

I wade a few steps through the water, the heaviness of the wet pants pulling me down a bit, but I'm definitely not going to take them off. Lou could jump to the wrong conclusion.

I look down at myself with a disgusted snort.

A mixture of lake and black water drips from my hoodie. I rip it over my head, throw it into the lake and walk a few steps to the babbling waterfall. Directly underneath, I spread my arms and let the ice water beat my hair. For seconds, I hear nothing but the powerful rushing, smell the cool freshness of the mountain, feel the jets of water on my bare skin. It feels a bit like when I laughed before. Lou suddenly pops into my mind and I glance over my shoulder.

It’s like déjà vu. I know that facial expression, eyes round, lips parted. She stares spellbound in my direction, just like she did in the alcove with the camping utensils.

What does she see in me right now? The young man, the adventurer? Or is she contemplating the moment to run away from her captor?

Not knowing gnaws at me and has made me restless for days. I return to the curious feeling of no longer knowing anything for sure.

“You can wash Grey by the waterfall over there,” I call out to her. “There’s a warm spot.”

She doesn’t respond.

“Lou? Are you listening?”

“What did you say?” She looks at me like she’s never seen me before.

“You can wash Grey in the waterfall if you like. There’s one spot where the water is a little warmer.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure!”

She gets up, fishes Grey off the ground, and stiffly walks like a stork to the back of the lake all the while holding Grey out as if he were infested with parasites.

“Left! Further left!” I shout twice before she understands.

If only I knew what she is thinking or feeling. If only she would talk to me about it. It makes no sense to address it, I already tried that today. Maybe I was too direct. Maybe she simply needs more time, that’s all. After all, we’re just beginning to get to know and understand each other better.

I think back to earlier when I had to laugh so hard. Even now I can still feel the reverberations inside me, the trembling in my chest, the shaking, the tightening of my stomach muscles. In a way, it’s just like crying, just the opposite. Absent-mindedly, I wade after my drifting sweater. Laughter and crying may also be two sides of the same coin, of the same emotion, so close together, yet so far apart.

I feel strangely alien.

Too bad you don’t want to know who you truly are.

Maybe Lou can help me figure that out. Maybe with her I can become the best version of myself.

I fish the hoodie out of the water, which is now almost clean, and wade back. Lou watches me and I impulsively wave the sweater at her. She doesn’t laugh or splash water around herself, but the way she stands in front of the waterfall comes close to the images from my imagination.

CHAPTER 22

The sun beats relentlessly down on the clearing, leaving noxious black water sludge behind. The heat makes the stench so much worse. We have to tie cloths around our noses to be able to work at all. I insisted that Lou rests, but she wanted to help. So, I gave her a bucket and now she eagerly follows me into the forest to fetch fresh soil.

She's working like a maniac, maybe because she had the mishap, I don't know. Every now and then, she gives me a look I can't read. It could be sadness or pity, but it definitely doesn't fit the situation and confuses me more than I care to admit.

After ten excursions into the forest, she is too weak to shovel earth into the bucket herself, so I fill it for her.

"You look like a bank robber," she says as she watches me. "Like a bank robber digging a tunnel to a bank."

"As long as I don't look like a shovel murderer, fine with me," I mutter through the fabric. "By the way, you don't exactly look like the lovely girl next door, either." She's wearing long jeans and a black T-shirt, both of which should be washed, but we didn't want to wear clean clothes for the dirty work. The dark cloth she has pulled over her mouth and nose gives her a slightly criminal look—so I can imagine what I must look like.

Lou grins feebly, wipes a few dead flies off her forehead with the back of her hand, and runs her fingers over her jeans. Together, we

carry the buckets to the clearing and pour the dirt into the black-water channel in the gravel. Sweat runs down my back and my white shirt sticks to my skin. I feel like a steaming pile of manure and I think Lou must feel the same.

Eventually, the entire hole is filled with dirt—it looks a bit like a fresh grave. The sight makes me shiver and I look away.

"It still stinks," Lou says dryly, picking up Grey, who's been following her all day. "Well, little one…you've been glued to my heels all day," she scolds affectionately.

"Maybe he thinks you don't like him anymore, now that he's turned into a skunk."

"Nonsense!" Lou lifts him to her cheek and Grey happily licks it. When she wrinkles her nose almost imperceptibly and sets him down quickly, I grin. Grey bolts away, swerving like a rabbit, before sniffing at the heaped earth as if a dead animal was buried there.

Because of the overwhelming stench, I have no choice but to drive the camper forward several feet and only then do we empty the gray water tank and wash the laundry at the same time.

Then, Lou disappears into the shower while I carry the camp chairs to the new RV site and build a second bed for the campfire.

Later, as she descends the stairs, a cloud of citrus blossom body wash wafts over to me. Now comes the awkward part: I have to chain her up. Ever since she began wearing the bells, I've always showered at night, but today, I am too dirty to wait that long.

Without saying a word, I click two chains together and attach one end to the steel eyelet on the frame, which I also used the night of the storm.

"Come here, Lou." I try to sound casual like I'm calling her to dinner.

She turns to me, obviously too busy with Grey to notice my movements.

She looks at me confused. "What about Grey?" is all she asks.

"I don't think he'll run off seeing how glued he is to you."

A shadow crosses her pretty features, but she doesn't reply and comes toward me, arm outstretched.

"Take off these bell bracelets, at least," she demands as if trying to negotiate a deal with me.

"Too complicated." I shake my head. "Besides, I won't take long."

She picks Grey up and hugs him, lips pressed together. For a moment, the true face of the situation reveals itself again. We are perpetrator and victim, nothing more. That is the ugly truth.

"Did you lather Grey with citrus blossom gel, too?" I try to soften the harshness of the situation when I smell lemons coming from Grey.

Lou nods, then smiles sheepishly. "Of course, what do you think? Do you want him to smell like you and your shower gel when he sleeps in my bed?"

Good counter. I get angry and jealous of Grey for a moment.

After the shower, I dab iodine on my wrist injuries. Some areas heal poorly because the skin has simply been chafed too often. The tissue festers at a gaping wound. Luckily, the redness around Lou's wrists has subsided since she started wearing the wristbands.

I join her outside and undo the cuff without a comment. Lou acts indifferent, although that's just an act. She's a bit too preoccupied with Grey to look at me.

In the meantime, the weather has grown cooler and a sharp wind whistles through the treetops. The old scar under my leather bracelet throbs. Changing weather. Maybe we're in for a storm, I'm not sure. This morning's fog was also a good indicator.

After glancing at the blue-gray sky, I open a family-sized can of chili con carne and pour the minced meat and beans into a tin pot. It's attached to the tripod I cobbled together yesterday in case I ever run out of propane.

Using a chain borrowed from Lou's shackles, I pull the pot up and hook it. All that's missing is the fire.

Instinctively, I reach into my pocket, but my lighter isn't there. *Of course not*. It was in the cargo pants I was wearing when I jumped into the lake after the black water incident.

I turn to Lou. She's hanging our laundry, hidden by the tree around which one end of the line is tied. I only see part of her arm, but she's holding something black. "Hey, Lou! Are those my pants?" I walk around the tripod. "Toss me the lighter! Let's see if that thing survived the bath."

She doesn't react, just like she didn't earlier at the lake.

What's going through her head in those moments? Home? Me? Escape?

"Hey, Lou! Are you daydreaming?"

Her bells jingle in quick succession.

What is she doing?

I take a few long strides toward the group of trees in which she hangs the clothes.

Before I reach her, her hand holding my pants snaps in my direction and covers her face in the process.

"I… I couldn't find it." Her voice is shrill. "You…you must have lost it in the lake. Or while washing."

So she heard me after all. Her fingers tremble!

Why is she afraid? Distrust rushes through my veins like a shot of adrenaline.

"Hm!" The dull sound suppresses the hundreds of images racing through my mind. Lou setting fire to the RV. Lou setting the forest ablaze to escape. Without taking my eyes off her, I grab my pants and search every pocket. Maybe she took it and thought about her options for a moment before putting it back.

Lou swallows and fiddles with the hem of her blouse.

I rummage through the last pocket. My fingers find a handkerchief and a cable tie—no sign of my lighter.

"Too bad!" I toss my pants over the line like they're a venomous snake.

"Did you only have the one?" Lou asks squeakily.

"Of course not!" I glare at her. "But it was the only gas lighter." Is it in the lake or did she pocket it? A dark anger squeezes my throat at the thought. Why is she tugging her shirt down over her shorts? What is she trying to hide?

Why are you shaking, Lou? Should I search you and break my promise?

I examine her again from head to toe. Exhaustingly long. "Are you cold?"

"I don't feel so good." She sounds pathetic. She's not a good liar. The old anger rolls through me in waves. It seems to me she is about to pull the deciding card from our house of cards.

"You might be sick, you're shaking all over, Lou!" My voice is icy. I pull myself together as I step toward her so I don't yell the next few words. "I'm going to ask you once and I expect an honest answer."

She looks up at me. Startled deer-in-the-headlight look.

"Did you take the lighter, yes or no?"

"No!" she squeaks and a frantic blush appears on her cheeks. I stare at the one shaped like Africa.

"Okay." My dangerously low voice sends an icy shiver down even my spine. The house of cards collapses. Card after card of painstakingly stacked trust. Black dots dance in the corners of my eyes.

"May I go in?" I hear Lou ask through the fog of my anger.

She sounds as frightened as she was at the beginning of our journey. I want to scream.

"I told you that you don't have to ask my permission for everything!" I bark at her. "This sucks. Like I'm a monster that forbids everything!"

I don't know how much longer I can go without breaking something. It feels like nothing is real anymore. Neither Lou nor me. Her whole demeanor was a lie, an illusion she created to deceive me. At least now I know the answer to my questions.

I clench my hands in exasperation and watch her creep toward the RV with her shoulders slouched, the product of a guilty conscience. Before she disappears inside, she turns to me again.

You took it. You lied to me, I tell her with a look that leaves no doubt.

Why didn't I search her? Fuck the promise! This would have been an exceptional case. And exceptional cases need exceptional rules.

That's what he said, Brendan. He—before he left Blacky in the ground!

The feeling of falling twitches through my body. My field of vision grows hazy like dark frosted glass.

Stay here, Brendan. Breathe. Find your focus. Lou did not run away. And you'll make sure she doesn't. The lighter can't do her any good!

What was I about to do?

Oh, yes, light the campfire!

I storm into the RV. Lou is curled up on the bed, the down comforter pulled up to the tip of her nose. She watches my every move intently, as if I might suddenly turn into the lunatic she fears. Maybe I do, too. Maybe it would be better to chain us both up.

Grey whines behind me, but I ignore him. Full of anger, I unlock the cabinet above the side door and fish out a packet of matches.

My eyes fall on the small brown bottle with the emergency drops. A special cocktail I mixed together in Los Angeles, especially for Lou as a precaution if I ever needed to sedate her quickly in the wild. *A dose for cases like this*. I quickly put the bottle in my pocket and then glare at Lou again. *I'll give you the drops if necessary*. *That's a promise, too!* I slam the door shut and storm outside.

At the firepit, I force myself to just get on with what I started earlier. Shaking, I light the fire, charring my thumbnail when the wind blows the flame toward me. I curse under my breath. Tinder flies away in the gusts, but somehow I get the fire going. After that, I stir the chili as if on autopilot and can no longer think straight.

Did she take the lighter or not? Her reaction can only mean yes. What is she going to do with it?

Should I give her the drops to search her? Or should I incapacitate her to consider how to proceed? I toss the spoon into the pot and clench my hands. I stare into the chili for minutes until it starts bubbling. Wind ruffles my hair.

I don't like what I am thinking. At least, not the new Brendan. I'll have to chain Lou up again during the day until I find out the truth, maybe even longer. This is the only way. I can't trust her anymore. She lied to me, I am almost certain of it. She didn't respond to my

question about the lighter, she trembled, her voice was full of fear, and she pulled down of her blouse. Also: I had the lighter in my top pocket, which is quite deep. I didn't lose the zip tie either. No, Lou took it.

I breathe in. The feeling of falling has dissipated, but my mind keeps spinning like it's on hold.

Maybe Lou will give back the lighter. She knows that I know. She may abandon her plan, whatever it may be.

Suddenly, I hear footfalls on the steps.

"I'll make the milk for Grey," Lou calls over to me. Go ahead, I think with a snort and consider chaining her up right away. I glance over my shoulder. She's changed into a green-gray sweater and long jeans, and bends down for her hiking boots.

If I chain her up now, I will be angry and it will seem to her like an act of revenge. I have to wait until I'm calmer to explain it to her. Naturally, I don't want to punish her, it's just the logical consequence of her lie.

Who are you trying to fool, Bren? She hurt you. You almost believed she had feelings for you. And now—bam—everything is the same as before. You are starting over from scratch. Of course you want to punish her!

Lou disappears into the RV again and I hear her puttering around in the kitchen. Familiar sounds accompany the blustery wind and crackling fire. Eventually, she calls for Grey and that's when I realize he's been romping around right next to me. Like an arrow, he heads toward the RV and almost rolls over when he jumps up the steps. Lou picks him up, hugs him, and whispers to him. I turn abruptly and numbly poke around in the logs with a branch. Red sparks fly into the air, but the wind extinguishes them within seconds. I'm contemplating how to proceed when a piercing beeping rips through the air.

It is coming from the RV and is so shrill that it pierces my bones. That's not the fire alarm. I automatically throw the stick into the embers. In my mind, I see the RV exploding into a thousand pieces. Suddenly, I forget everything that came before.

I have to get Lou to safety.

I run to the door in a fury, yelling wild things I barely understand myself and trip over Grey in the process. He rushes toward the forest as if a bull moose is chasing him.

"Out. You have to get out now!" I yell as Lou appears at the side door. "Anything on inside?" I rush up the steps, grabbing her arm in my panic, and shoving her down hard.

Her eyes shine feverishly. "The stove," she whispers, frozen.

"Okay." I nod briefly and point to the tree line bordering the lake. "Go over there! All the way to the right. I want to be able to see you from the other side!" I give her a good shove to make her run, then rush around the RV and unhook the key from my belt. Maybe Lou will get sick after all. Maybe she was shaking because she has a fever. The lake was cold.

"Where's Grey?" I hear her asking over the deafening noise. "Grey?"

She was probably afraid of me and merely wanted to clean up as soon as possible. My fingers are sweaty and clumsy and it takes forever to unlock the hatch. Then the flap slips out of my hands and I pinch my finger. Angry, I punch the wall and curse out loud. On the second try, I am calmer and manage to hook the flap to the provided clip. Access to the gas tap. I glance around for Lou and spot her at the spruce tree line. She's still looking for Grey.

Okay, Brendan, everything is under control. Now close that fucking tap or Lou can scrape you and what's left of the RV off the forest floor.

I turn the bronze knob, but it won't move. Sweat pools in my palm, making it slippery.

"Shit!" I yell into the endless beeping. It's like a knife on my nerves. I frantically wipe my hand on my pants and try again. This time the knob turns, although it is noticeably stiff.

Eventually, I make it. A sigh of relief escapes my lips, but in the next moment, I remember the stove. Without closing the hatch, I jump up and rush around the RV.

The kettle sits atop the high flame, which shrivels like a stunted blue flower, apparently fueled by the last bits of propane. With trembling fingers, I flip the switch, take the kettle off the stove, and

toss it in the sink. Hastily, I study the four old burners. Does the stove have a leak that set off the alarm? There has to be one somewhere or else it wouldn't have gone off. At that moment, I notice it is still beeping. I squat down and flip the switch.

It's quiet for the moment, but it's a strange silence. Almost spooky. Like in a grave.

A strange feeling spreads through me. I don't pay any attention to it, instead, I rip open all the windows to ventilate the interior.

I can take care of the leak later. It's a good thing I screwed the tripod together yesterday so Lou and I can cook over an open fire instead.

Lou!

The strange feeling inside me condenses into a hard lump. I jump down the steps and my gaze darts to the edge of the forest.

Lou is not there. Instead, I spot Grey chewing on something.

It is so silent. So quiet.

A part of me is suddenly terrified, like a child left alone in a foreign country. Waves of adrenaline rush through me as my brain puts two and two together.

The lighter that runs on gas… She could have set off the alarm with that.

No, she didn't, she's not that clever. No way!

The innocent questions about the propane tank and its location when she told me the story about Delsin…

"What would you have done then?"

"I would have turned off the gas bottle while you ran for safety."

But no! She couldn't have planned this!

Yet I don't see her. I move stiffly around the RV without hearing anything. She's gone, swallowed up by the earth.

Nausea fills my stomach. She is gone! Lou is gone!

An invisible noose wraps around my throat and tightens.

"Louisa?" I manage to croak out. "Lou?"

The graveled lot, the spruce trees, and the sky begin to flicker and a part of me emerges. At least that's how it feels. I see black flashes for several seconds before falling into an abyss with a scream that bursts out of me.

“LOUISA! COME BACK!”

CHAPTER 23

I stumble, fall to my knees, and hear myself gasp. The gravel on the ground blurs.

"Louisa! Come! Back! Immediately!" My screams flutter about me like a flock of sinister crows. I understand them and I don't understand them. It's like I exist twice. One Brendan out there and one trapped inside me.

When I sit up and look around, I peer straight into the little boy's timeless eyes. As before, I hear him count.

One, two, three, four, I'm not here anymore… You have to stay out.

For a moment, it's only him, me, and the darkness. "Why?" I whisper hoarsely.

"Grief. Too heavy for you. You'll fall apart."

With that, he walks away in his grubby pants, leaving me behind, paralyzed. I stare at his back, but he fades…

The boy runs. *He's never been this fast before. He doesn't look left or right and he doesn't look back. Behind him, the monster roars as if it has escaped from the doomed place. The boy's bare feet kick up dust on Thorson Ave. and he breathes it directly into his lungs. The grains scratch his throat, making it difficult to breathe, but this is his chance. Maybe the last one he'll ever get. He doesn't know how*

close behind him the man is, but he has a head start. The Santa Ana blows across his face and smells of salt and oil. Of so many things the boy doesn't know.

On the wide street, the boy dares to glance over his shoulder. The strong, iron-featured man dashes down Thorson Ave, fist raised. His forehead is bleeding, exactly where the boy hit him with the sawn-off wooden slat. That was for Blacky—otherwise, the boy would never have dared to attack him. But he suddenly saw this long piece of scrap wood in the workshop and the key for the back door was still in it. He doesn't remember how he did it, only that there was an ugly crack. It sounded like victory.

Now he stands on the road, watching the monster charge him. In this colorful, hectic environment, he seems more human again.

The boy's knees weaken. All of a sudden everything is too loud. The voices around him, the hum of the cars, the honking. A woman laughs next to him. She is as blonde as his Little Miss Sunshine.

Help me! *he wants to shout, but his voice fails. Nobody would help him anyway. Not even the police. They'd just bring him back even though they see the pathetic state he is in. The man would lie and put a few bills in the police men's hands. That's how it works.*

He ducks into a crowd of people crossing the street at the same time. With his arms stretched out in front, he squeezes between the bodies as if swimming.

The man yells. Somewhere behind the boy. Ice water runs down his back. On the other side, he bumps into a stranger. He closes his eyes resignedly. He will restrain him, hand him over to the man. But nothing happens. The stranger just snaps at him before walking on, briefcase tucked under his arm.

For a moment, the boy stands there perplexed. He looks back. The monster has reached the intersection. A few people turn to look at him. Soon, they'll know why he's yelling so much. Then it'll be over.

The boy starts running. He knows where he wants to go. From the newspaper, he learned about an area that no police officer wants to go to. It borders his neighborhood. He read about gangs and fights. This area is his only chance to escape the man's clutches. He

has memorized everything: the picture shown at the time with the few street names that were included. Now, he doesn't recognize any of it. Everything is foreign to him. He runs without knowing where to. His whole body aches from the beating, but he ignores it. At the next intersection, he turns right and disappears again into a stream of chattering people. So many intersections. So many streets. Lights. It smells of pizza and fries. Of cigarette smoke.

Teenagers push him back and forth like a dog, laughing, but he doesn't care. He just has to escape. The night becomes a river of screams, cars, wild honking, and music. It smells of food again. His stomach growls. A woman with bright red lips speaks to him and laughs, but he staggers away from her.

At some point, he lost the monster. For the first time, he slows down. He's not in the neighborhood he wanted to reach. Hands pressed to his ribs, he walks down a paved road lined with mighty palm trees on both sides. Tall palm trees, so tall he has to tilt his head back to see their tops. The Santa Ana wind gently bobs the fronds up and down.

To his right, a collection of colorful stalls rises up on a stilt plateau. At the edge is a Ferris wheel with blue flashing spokes. This must be the Santa Monica Pier he's seen so many times in the morning paper.

Suddenly, he feels too small for this world.

He stops. There's something in the air. Not only wind, but also coolness and humidity. Like someone sprayed salt in the air. In the distance, he hears a steady whooshing. He turns once more to make sure the monster is truly gone before running in the direction of the noise. His feet touch something soft that tickles him. He looks down. Sand. It feels funny, but he doesn't laugh. His toes are bloody. He lifts his foot and pulls a shard of glass from his big toe. He doesn't feel any pain, there's no room for that right now.

He needs to know what the sound is and keeps moving. Suddenly, he sees it glittering in the moonlight.

The ocean.

For a moment, he is dizzy because it's so vast. His gaze glides over the pitch-black surface toward the white, foamy surf.

The boy watches as the waves break on the shore. He's waiting for something. Maybe a feeling. You should feel something when you see the ocean for the first time. He waits for his lungs to expand, but they contract. He swallows and presses his fists into his stomach. His shoulders twitch, but he doesn't cry. Not even now. He doesn't cry and he doesn't laugh. But he is free.

All he can think about is Rhode Island. It is the smallest state in the United States and comes after Pennsylvania in the alphabet. Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina.

Yet he can't think of his own name. He has forever forgotten it.

When I come to, everything is black and white. I blink several times, but the color doesn't return. The canopy remains dark gray and the spruce trunks appear black. The flash isn't over, I just have a lucid phase. This time, I'm not lying on the forest floor, but standing rigid like a statue in front of the RV, my left hand around a long metal chain.

The memory flashes through me like lightning: I have to get Lou back!

With a pounding heart, I peer up at the treetops, which are bouncing up and down in the storm. Dark rumbling fills the air. Now I'm absolutely certain there's going to be a storm tonight—I need to find Lou before it hits the area.

Where did she go? Where would you run to if you wanted to escape? Never in the direction of the street, that would be too dangerous because you could be intercepted.

For a moment, I smell sea salt and sand. The cold wind turns into the warm Santa Ana of Los Angeles and the rustling of the trees becomes the surf.

I would walk along the stream to avoid getting lost! I resolutely grab the metal chain and get a mental picture of the situation. The sky seems gray, but it's still late afternoon. Grey howls in the RV. I must have locked him inside, closed all the windows, and even put out the fire. I can't take Grey with me, he would only slow me down.

There is still a chance I can catch up with Lou at the cliffs. If she's not there, I can always drive down the road.

I wipe my face with the sleeve of the hoodie and stumble forward. The fear of being pulled out of reality again by my memories balls up like a fist inside me. I have to find Lou. I can't even begin to think about losing her after all this time. No more Lou smiles. No cute red spots on pale cheeks.

I walk along the lake, which seems dull and murky to me.

You'll find her. She won't get far!

If she follows the creek, it will take her at least an hour to reach the cliffs.

I search for the deer trail, a path trampled flat by a herd of caribou that I came across while setting traps. The path leads steeply downhill. Again and again, I stop and listen, but I can't hear anything apart from the rustling of the treetops. Here and there, pine cones fall to the ground and bounce between the dead wood.

"Lou?" I call out as loud as I can. "Come back! You'll only get lost!"

I stop again and listen. Nothing. My gaze wanders down the slope toward the stream, but the trees are too close together. I only see dark branches, undergrowth, and tall grass to the right and left of the path.

"Louisa! Come back to me at once!"

What if she escapes? Fear and anger mix inside me, a dull, nameless pressure. I want to scream, freak out, bang my head against the nearest log. How could I have been so stupid and fall for the gas trick! I run faster and almost trip over a decaying badger at the bottom of the slope.

I can't lose Lou. Never! Ever! I can't lose her! Never lose! Never lose!

I can't think of anything else. After a while, the forest thins out. The deadwood beyond the path grows, revealing more and more forest floor, a sure sign I'm near the gorge.

Suddenly, I hear a faint rustling and stop, but it's only a flying crow cawing. From my position, I see the last line of trees before the cliffs. Through the gaps between the trees, I notice the sky is

pregnant with rain. Cautiously, I continue, and out of the corner of my eye notice movement at the edge of the slope.

My heart is pounding. Lou is next to a birch tree that has grown horizontally over the precipice with one hand clutching an upright branch. She's peering down into the gorge, probably searching for a way down.

A thousand feelings wash over me: relief, warmth, anger.

Involuntarily, my fingers tighten around the metal chain and I pull it from my shoulder as if to use it as a lasso. Now that Lou is standing there unharmed, all I can think about is getting her back.

She's not an animal, Brendan!

She belongs to me! She ran away from me!

Don't hurt her!

I'll get her back, no matter the cost!

Step by step, I creep up the slope, always hidden by the trees. Old anger flares up inside me and it takes all my strength to contain it.

I'll be sure to not let you run away a second time!

Before I reach her, a rotten branch breaks under my sole.

Lou whips around like she's been bitten by a tarantula. When she discovers me, she collapses, makes herself small like she did in the RV. Her face is deathly pale, her eyes large and dark.

"Bren…" I think she whispered my name. Her chest rises and falls in rapid succession.

"There's nowhere to go from here," I explain to her in a calm voice, trying to hide my anger. I take two steps toward her. "The terrain ends at this ravine. You can walk along the cliff as long as you like, but you can't get into the valley." I sound more ominous than intended. I must not frighten her, but I shouldn't give her hope, either. Only now do I notice how close she is to the abyss and stop. "Come here. Don't make it any worse for yourself!"

She shakes her head imperceptibly and backs away. A few rocks tumble off the edge and Lou staggers.

"Careful!" I yell. My pulse is pounding hard in the pit of my throat.

Lou clutches the branch she's holding more tightly. She feels for the trunk with her feet. It juts out over the rocks like a balance beam for many feet—too many. "If you come closer, I'll jump!" she yells.

In my mind, I see her petite body smashing against the foot of the ravine. The thought makes me dizzy. *This is madness! Oh, God, this is crazy!* She's actually going to kill herself! I'm too far away to stop her.

"I don't want to scare you, Lou." I silently force myself to remain calm while sweat runs down my back. "I'm not going to hurt you. I promised you that a hundred times. That won't change. Even now." My skin is soaking wet, I wipe my forehead. "Come on, Lou, you know what can happen!"

"No!" She shakes her head frantically. "I don't want to be chained up like a prisoner again."

She looks at me over the few feet and a strange sadness creeps into her eyes. Like this afternoon when we dumped dirt onto the black water together.

There's so much in her eyes, so much she doesn't say. Maybe she feels more for me after all. Maybe she's torn by everything she's feeling.

The longer I look at her, the more I think I understand her. She's like me, she doesn't know herself anymore. She is confused, hurt, and angry. She is scared and desperate. Why should her feelings be pigeonholed? One good, one bad. One love, one hate. Everything is mixed up inside her as if there is only one compartment for everything.

"It was my fault," I say. My heart fills with pity and sorrow. "I shouldn't have made it so easy for you. The moment I was certain you took my lighter, I knew you were up to something. I should have acted immediately." I force myself to smile, though it never took so much strength to do so. "Well, too late now. So, let's go back and you can hate me again!"

"Why didn't you search me if you were so sure?" Lou asks defiantly.

"I promised not to touch you. So, how could I…"

"That's why you left the cupboard unlocked instead. To test me!"

"No!" The wind picks up. It blows Lou's hair and tugs at her clothes. She needs to get off the trunk immediately before a heavy gust knocks her off.

With renewed determination, I pull out the emergency drops. "It was carelessness, due to my anger and the first wave of a blackout. Besides, there was nothing in the cupboard that would have helped you get rid of me." I stare at the bottle. The wind howls in my ears.

"What are you going to do with that?" Lou asks in a thin voice.

"I'll sedate you so I don't have to use force to get you back. For your sake."

She flinches as if I hit her. For a moment, I think she's about to cry, but then she straddles the trunk.

"I'd rather jump before you force that stuff down my throat again!" she yells and pushes herself inch by inch on the trunk over the abyss. Her movements are clumsy and shaky. Every second, I'm more afraid she might lose her balance and fall into the gorge.

"Lou, get off it now!" It's supposed to sound like an order, but I fail. It sounds pathetic.

She slides further out. "Go away!" A tear rolls down her cheek, infinitely slowly, almost in slow motion.

A strange, unfamiliar feeling rises in my throat. It burns my throat. "Lou…" I want to hug her and comfort her, tell her everything will be fine. But I can't do that. "I'm not making you suffer on purpose. I know how much you miss your brothers. If I had known how bad this was going to be for you, then…"

"Then you would have kidnapped another girl?" she snaps. "We already talked about that!"

I step toward her, clutching the small bottle in my hand like a crutch. "I've always wanted you and you know why. That's why I don't think you're going to jump. You love life far too much." I don't know if I believe my own words.

More and more tears stream down Lou's pale cheeks. "You took my life away from me," she sobs. "You stole it."

Just like the monster stole mine. An immeasurable feeling of misery encircles my chest like an iron ring. For a reason I don't

understand, I pocket the emergency drops and hold out a hand to Lou.

"Don't do it, Lou. Please…" If she hurts herself, it's my fault. Then she'll no longer have the opportunity to live her life, no matter with whom.

She glances down. There's nothing there but rock and water.

Lou, come back! I beg silently, but she slides out even further.

The sight of her sitting there on the narrow log over the ravine makes me nauseous.

I make the decision that, until now, was only in my subconscious. The bottle, which she got me to put away, has now surfaced in my mind.

"Lou," I say loudly enough for her to hear. "I know you don't want any of this. You are desperate. And you want me to see it. You'll go so far as to put yourself in danger to prove it to me. But guess what: I get it." Slowly, so as not to startle her, I back away from her and hurry along the edge of the cliff. When I'm far enough away from her, my arm reaches back and I throw the chain into the ravine.

"See?" I shout at her against the wind, laughing even though it feels wrong.

She stares at me for a moment. Confused, like I've ripped a mask off my face, like she's actually seeing me for the first time. That gaze sets my chest on fire. Everything in me is falling apart. I will lose her if I drink the concoction myself. I don't know for sure, but it's likely. With powerless desperation, I pull the bottle out of my pocket. I have no choice. I have to drink the stuff, or she'll never get off the log and back on the cliff because she doesn't trust me. But she has to get back on solid ground before she gets thrown off by the storm. If she doesn't jump.

You'll lose her! She will leave you!

It happens quickly. I feel myself falling to my knees while, at the same time, falling into an abyss. Dark wind whirls around me. I end up in the dark room, the dark part of my soul.

You're breaking, whispers the boy inside me.

For seconds, I lie in the dark and stare upward. It's too narrow, too black, too lonely. The new feeling from earlier flows into every cell, weighing them down.

So dark, so dark…underground…why did you leave? Don't stop breathing. Don't stop breathing. Keep your hands still. Do not cry. Don't stop breathing…

Is that my voice? It is inside me and outside me.

I hear someone calling. Clear and blue as the sky. "Bren? Bren…"

Lou!

In the darkness, I search for her face, but I can't find it. *I'll lose her! I will lose her forever!* I shatter into a million pieces that splinter around me like the shards of a mirror. Images flash before me stroboscopic-like. The face of a smiling young woman. Blonde hair frames her face. She peers down at me with bright eyes, her lips forming a word. Indistinctly, as if through fog, I hear it. Bren-dan. Bren-dan.

Mom?

She runs after me, arms outstretched to catch me. I squeal in delight and run clumsily away from her, but she grabs me, throws me lovingly onto the sofa cushions and thoroughly tickles me. Her long hair brushes my face and I grab it in my fists. "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy!" I laugh. "Mommy, stop!"

Something is choking me and I can't breathe. Red fog rises before my eyes and again I hear the deep voice: *Step aside*.

I'm knocked over and all the images are gone. For seconds, I see the boy walking along the sea, searching for the area that will be his home for years to come. Suddenly, I find myself back in my body even though I'm not really there.

"Bren," I hear Lou whisper. "You are here, with me. Not somewhere else. Bren…it's me…Lou."

I'm still on the ground.

"Bren, I don't know what happened to you in the past…but that's over. You are no longer locked up, you are free. You just have to look properly to see it."

I rock back and forth like I can take her voice into my nightmare. "Bren…everything is fine. You're not trapped."

Someone else takes my place. “Lies! Everything is black.” I run to Lou, but it’s not her anymore. She looks like my mom.

After that, something snaps inside me and flies away like a kite severed from its string.

When I come to, there’s that voice again. It resonates as if from a distant land and it is beautiful, although it sounds so sad. Like the last time, I let it carry me up to the place where everything could be fine.

“Bren…” it whispers. “It’s only me. Lou. Lou, the girl you kidnapped.”

Lou. Lou. Lou. Dark and light, the name echoes within me as she continues to speak to me. More and more words drip like sweet balm onto my wounds. *Run away. Don’t hate you*. I don’t understand all of them, but they make sense, like notes in a piece of music. *A part of me…actually likes.*

I’m clutching a birch branch with one foot on the trunk.

My eyes hurt and I blink a few times. I don’t want the voice to stop talking, I want it to lead me out. Again, sentence melodies get through to me. *That part, the one that likes you…insane…completely insane…don’t get it myself*. I flow with the voice…*got into your RV and kissed…not to run away from it*.

Something cold touches my face. Gusts of wind.

Suddenly, I see clearly again and discover Lou in front of me. “Louisa?” I ask, stunned because I don’t understand anything anymore. “What are you doing here?”

Tears stream down her cheeks. “I’m sitting in a tree and I’m scared,” she whispers through sobs. Her whole body is shaking.

I’m heartbroken. She spoke to me again during the blackout. Maybe she even brought me back.

“I was gone, wasn’t I?”

“Pretty much.” She nods weakly.

I want to say a thousand things, but I can’t put into words what’s going on inside me.

"It's too dangerous." Decidedly, I rise from the tree trunk and search for the bottle. It must have rolled out of my hands as I drifted away. I spot it in the grass and pick it up.

I look at Lou again. "Come down from there, please…" I say urgently.

The wind inflates her sweater like a balloon.

"I'm not drinking that!" she exclaims, clinging to the branch like a shipwrecked woman.

"The concoction works almost immediately. It took me a long time to get the mixture just right." I walk backward into the woods to show Lou I'm keeping my distance. "Originally, it was meant for you, so it won't act quite as strong on me since I weigh a bit more than you do."

"On you?" she asks, confused.

I grip the bottle tighter and down the contents in one gulp. "I had no intention of taking it myself. But I guess you won't climb down that goddamn tree otherwise," I tell her. "I don't know when I'll have my next seizure. What if I try to get you down from there? Or you get startled by my behavior and lose your balance…"

It starts to roar in my ears. It sounds a bit like someone pumping air against my eardrums. My surroundings grow fuzzy, but this time it's the drug. I stumble blindly through the forest, my foot getting tangled in a stack of deadwood and I fall to the ground. Sweat pours down my face and my pulse pounds in my throat.

Clenching my teeth, I crawl to a bare tree trunk and sit against it.

I planned on feeding this stuff to Lou! The thought makes me feel so sick, I want to die.

"Bren?"

Lou sounds close. That means she's not in the tree anymore! My eyes want to close, but I keep them open convulsively, searching for Lou in the dim light.

She stands at the edge of the forest next to a spruce, pale and translucent like a small ghost. My heart warms as I look at her. Suddenly, I remember the storm.

"You shouldn't run away, too dangerous." My words sound slurred. "Besides, I'd catch you anyway." I feebly wipe my face as if

it helps me think better, but my mind feels like it's being boiled. I force myself to look at Lou, but her face flickers erratically. "It gets much too cold at night. You'd freeze to death."

"But I have your lighter," she whispers, sounding guilty.

I have to smile even though I don't feel like it. "You're going to burn down the forest and then I'll know where you are anyway—if you survive." I close my eyes, unable to fight the leaden weariness any longer. My head just drops. "Lou?"

"Yes?"

I hear branches cracking. She comes to me. Slowly. I can almost see her looking shyly down at me.

"Storm…tonight…stay… Don't go, too dangerous." I slip away. My upper body sinks toward the forest floor. Two gentle hands grab my shoulders but cannot hold me.

Half asleep, I notice Lou is bending my legs. More and more, I merge with the earth.

Suddenly, warm breath is on my face. Is that Lou hovering over me?

Why is Lou bending over me and not fleeing?

She brushes back a strand of my hair. The touch feels so loving that something tenses up inside me.

Suddenly, I can think of so many things I want to say to her because when she leaves, she must pay attention to a thousand things. But I'm so tired. Images pass me by like a movie. Lou's oval face with the soft chin and sweet mouth—her profile picture on Facebook. Eyes like the Alaskan sky. Lou climbing out of the Toyota like the moment means nothing. Lou in the visitor center staring at me from the booth, clutching bear spray like a gun. "Lou…" I slur, tongue thick, eyes closed. Her hand jerks back. "If you go…the grizzlies…don't stop singing…"

She takes a deep breath. She doesn't say: *okay* or *yes*. She whispers: "Take care!" But it sounds a bit like tears.

I feel her rising and I'm instantly cold from the lack of her body heat. She mumbles something, but I no longer understand. Shortly thereafter, her steps rustle across the ground and all that remains is the whistling of the wind.

CHAPTER 24

Head pounding, I heave myself up onto the trunk behind me. Clustered rain clouds race across the blue-gray sky and sharp gusts of wind shake the treetops. I get dizzy for a moment and see bright flashing patterns and then, without warning, I throw up right at my feet.

Dazed, I stagger to the side, hold on to a spruce branch and wipe my mouth with my sleeve.

Lou escaped. Naturally. I already suspected that when I came to, even if it took a while to sort through the memories. I can't estimate how long I lay on the forest floor after passing out.

Now there's only one way I can find Lou: I have to get back to the RV and put Grey on her trail. She could be anywhere by now. On the gravel road, on the cliffs, in the middle of the forest.

Pain and fear pound in the back of my head. With shaky legs, I start walking and make a mental note of all the things I'll need later: a tarp to stretch out as a rain shelter, milk for Grey, dishes, warm clothes…

I pause for a moment and take a deep breath. In a storm and rain, Lou will never get a fire going, even I'd have a hard time.

Panicking, I swallow the nausea as I fight my way up the mountain step by step. After a few minutes, I can walk again without holding on to the logs and switch to the deer trail. Still, I'm

too slow. It seems to be hours before I get back to the RV. Grey's howling has stopped, and for a brief moment, I'm hopeful that Lou might have listened to me and ran back. But when I open the door, Grey dashes toward me, leaping awkwardly on my legs. Lou isn't here or Grey wouldn't be freaking out like this

I immediately realize I have to feed him before I can leave. My head suddenly goes blank. I'm wasting too much time. As if in a dense fog, I go outside, turn on the gas, and put on the water for the milk. As I stand in front of the stove, I feel like everything is swaying around me. My skull feels like it's about to explode. I could take a couple of aspirins, but I'm afraid they might be useless against the aftermath of the emergency drops.

While the water is boiling, I grab my hiking pack from the compartment and hastily stuff in a full carton of milk for Grey, a box of oatmeal, beef jerky, hard crackers, and a lighter.

What else do I need? How long will I be gone? I have absolutely no idea. I have knives and tools on my belt. I'm looking at a gallon of water, which would add too much weight. Instead, I grab two regular liter bottles that I plan to fill up as necessary along the way. I also need tablets to disinfect the water. I slam the flap, tripping over Grey who's been following me and give him a talking-to.

I can't afford to forget anything. Back in the RV, I randomly stuff breakfast bags, tin dishes, nuts, a sleeping bag, a tarp, and a blanket into the backpack along with a change of clothes for Lou and me, bandages, and pills for the water.

What else? My head is on strike.

With trembling fingers, I prepare the milk, feed Grey, and mentally review everything. I can find enough to eat in the wilderness. Berries and leaves for tea, maybe even set traps depending on how long I'm on the road. Wire. I'll need wire for that.

After Grey has finished the milk, I put him on the fleece sweater on the bench and retrieve the wire from the compartment. My eyes fall on a sturdy rope that can bear the weight of up to three people in an emergency. Without thinking, I attach it to my belt because there is no more room in the backpack.

Then, I turn off the gas, put on my thickest down jacket, and slip into lined boots. I might have to walk through the night and I don't want to give up because of hypothermia.

When I'm all packed, I grab one of Lou's sweaters so Grey knows who to look for and tuck the wolf between my chest and jacket.

I let him sniff Lou's scent where I last saw her. Of course, it's possible that she ran back and is now heading toward the road. Then my undertaking would be in vain, but there is no other option.

The sun has already set. It's after ten o'clock now and Lou is all alone in the middle of the wilderness. What if I can't find her and she freezes to death? Or she dies of thirst after days of torment? The idea of her struggling with the last of her strength and finally collapsing is killing me. With numb fingers, I untie the flashlight from my belt and run past the lake to the deer crossing.

"Lou?" I call out into the darkness, ignoring the pangs in my head. "Lou? Are you here? I won't hurt you, just come back!"

Wind rushes over me and an eerie groan moves through the forest like the moaning of ghosts. "We'll just carry on as before. I promise. I won't chain you anymore, Lou. Just come back! Please!"

Grey is whimpering against my chest but I don't have the patience to sooth him now. I continue calling Lou's name.

Eventually, I come to the spot where the half-decayed badger carcass lies.

"Lou? Are you here somewhere? Answer me! Please!" I don't care how desperate I sound. I wouldn't even care if Lou saw me crying, if I could. I just want to find her and tell her that from now on, I'll do everything better.

"Lou?" Something large and heavy crashes to the ground beside me. I spin around and my flashlight lands on a huge branch that must have snapped off a tree. "Lou?" I run on as the pounding in my head moves into my ears. "Lou? Answer me!"

I let Grey sniff Lou's sweater, but he knows who we're looking for anyway. On his clumsy paws, he moves along the edge of the cliff in

the dark. Lou probably didn't believe me that there is no descent here.

Shivering, I wrap my arms around myself. My fingers are frozen stiff and my ears are numb from the cold. I could pull my hood up, but then I might not hear Lou. I still call her name periodically, but only the dark howl of the wind answers. It sounds menacing as if it knows of some calamity that has happened to Lou. I look around anxiously. The gusts rip like hands at the treetops. In the middle of the forest, Lou could be killed by falling branches, so I keep hoping she kept walking along the cliff the whole time.

I barely managed three miles when the first raindrops hit.

I clench my teeth, hoping Grey doesn't lose the scent with everything getting soaked.

"Come on, Grey, don't give up!" I call to the little wolf, who has stopped to sniff around. "Do you have her scent?"

The rain beats down on us harder and harder. Grey is thoroughly soaked and shaking so bad, I'm afraid he won't last much longer. He peers up at me, then keeps walking, but I can tell he is exhausted. After a few minutes, I call him back, pick him up, and tuck him under my jacket to keep him warm.

He lets out a pathetic whine as if to apologize for not being able to help me.

"It's okay," I whisper. "It's fine. I'll carry you a bit. Let's hope Lou walked a straight line from here."

Time blurs with the rain. A sharp pain runs up my legs to my hips. Maybe it's the cold, maybe it's an aftereffect of the drops. Again and again, I pull Grey out of my jacket to see if he can find Lou's trail. When I place him on the ground this time, he smells the wet mud, turns in a circle, and looks at me helplessly.

"Okay. She wasn't here," I think aloud and pull out Lou's sweater, which is also tucked into the front of my down jacket. I let Grey sniff it in the rain and then inhale Lou's scent myself.

Immediately, an oppressive tightness rises in my throat and I quickly tuck the sweater back into my jacket. Now is certainly not the time for another flash.

I hurry back and Grey rushes past me like he's regained enough energy from the rest. He stops short at a boulder overgrown with bushes and starts howling loudly. Immediately, I'm at his side and kneel next to him. "What do we have here?" My heart races as I shine my flashlight down the embankment. The rough cliff falls sharply, so deep the lamp's beam can't reach the bottom.

Did Lou climb down here? No, she couldn't possibly have risked that. Suddenly, I have a stale taste in my mouth. Something silver glitters on a bush about six feet below me next to a tree stump. I shine my flashlight directly on it and my suspicion is confirmed. It's Lou's necklace with the colorful pendants.

Everything spins before my eyes. She must have fallen. She would never have dared climb down here. Especially not in this weather. Or would she?

I shine the flashlight into the abyss. I have to rappel. The rock is too steep and too slippery from the rain to free climb. I glance around frantically. There's nothing here to tie the rope to. I shine my light down again and the glow of the lamp catches the tree stump on the outcrop. That could work. With Grey between my bare skin and sweater, I slide down on my back, my numb fingers clutching the edge of the cliff. Wind whistles over me and I'm relieved when my feet land on the horizontal ledge. Once I have a secure footing, I fish Lou's chain out of the bush. The chain broke. I better not imagine why. I quickly stuff it into my pocket.

Then I loop the rope around the trunk so that I am holding two lines in my hands and shine the flashlight down again. The rock face is unpredictable due to the fissures. Hopefully, the rope will reach the bottom.

I push the thought away, place the flashlight in my mouth, and carefully lower myself down.

The first few feet are the most difficult. My arms are shaking, as soon as I can brace my feet against the steep rock, I feel better. Grey howls against my chest and inches downward. Good thing I tucked my sweater into my pants so he won't slide out.

I think of Lou again, hoping not to find her with twisted limbs at any moment now. As I glance over my shoulder into the dark valley,

my feet kick a few stones loose that rumble down the steep slope. For a second, I lose my footing and dangle from the rope midair. My muscles burn and the backpack pulls me down heavily. As if far away, I hear my scream echoing back to me from all sides as I bend my legs simultaneously and connect with the cliff face again. It takes me a few breaths before I realize the flashlight fell out of my mouth. I peer down and see its light a good fifteen feet below me. It lights up a shore with small pebbles.

Thank God! "We're almost there, Grey," I choke out breathlessly. As if he wanted to answer me, something wet trickles down my stomach into the waistband of my pants.

"Did you just pee on me?" I don't know whether to laugh or scold him. He lets out a whimper that sounds quite rueful.

I venture another look and see gravel but no Lou lying there. However, I'm still too tense to feel relieved.

When my feet finally hit the ground, I illuminate the area. Although I can't find Lou, I do spot a familiar-looking granola bar floating in a puddle.

"She did make it down here, Grey! Well done!" Grey is already bouncing ahead. I unwind the rope as I rush after Grey, who is walking along the river. Only now do I realize that my hands are wet with blood. I stop for a moment and dip them in the water. It's icy, but it feels good. Suddenly, I'm sure I'll find Lou again despite the cold slowing me down and my burning arms and legs. I just have to persevere.

When Grey eventually stops by the river and starts howling, my hope crumbles as quickly as it rose.

"That must be wrong, Grey, she can't swim. She would never…" I stop and look at the black surface of the water, which slides through the valley like a snake.

Grey no longer smells the trail, so Lou must have crossed the river.

And drowned in the process. Suddenly I can't think straight anymore. Not knowing what I'm doing, I grab Grey and dash into the river.

I feel my pant legs soaking up the water and growing heavy, but I don't care. The water is icy, but I don't feel the cold as if every part of my body is numb and desensitized from shock, as if I wouldn't feel anything anymore if something happened to Lou. Only a part of my mind is aware that the river is not deep here.

This part removes Grey from the protective jacket and lets him search for Lou on the other side. And that part also hurries after the little wolf as if on autopilot while the other part swallows the lump in his throat, not knowing what he will do if he can't find Lou.

My lungs begin to burn and a strange wheeze accompanies my breathing. Maybe I'm too cold now and haven't noticed. I know the *killer of the unprepared*. Canada's newspapers are full of it. A silent, unspectacular assassin. Insidious because you don't feel it breathing down your neck until the last second.

"Lou?" If I'm like this, what about her? "Lou?" I feel feverish, weak, but there's no way I can give up. I clench my teeth and hurry after Grey. Eventually, I realize I've lost the flashlight. It must have slipped out of my stiff fingers.

Stunned, I stare at the sky. The cloud cover has broken and a few stars peek out. *Help me find Lou*, I send a prayer to the sky. To a god I don't believe in because he forgot me. Now I implore him to help me. I'd promise him anything if he'd just let me find Lou.

At some point in my prayers, I hear Grey howling in the distance. It startles me because he was merely whimpering the whole time. Without paying attention, I run faster and find her lying huddled on the gravelly bank.

CHAPTER 25

"L*ou!"*

I'm at her side in no time and hold my stiff, frozen fingers under her nose. As her warm breath fills my palm, I collapse over her.

She's alive. Thank God she's alive!

As if in a trance, I put my hand on her forehead. Her skin is so icy, it scares me.

I recall what I know about hypothermia. I want to do a thousand things at the same time: start a fire, make tea, strip Lou of her wet clothes, and put her in the sleeping bag.

I carry her carefully to the edge of the forest, set her down, and spread the contents of the backpack on the ground until I find the blanket. I cover her with it. She is still unconscious from the cold. I have to think about how she touched me. "Hold on, Lou," I whisper, caressing her pale cheeks. "Just hold on and we'll see what we can do to make things better for you."

While Grey snuggles up to Lou, I collect birch and deadwood in the nearby forest since both burn when damp. Still, it takes forever to get a decent fire going.

Then I set up the tarp and spread out the sleeping bag underneath.

This time when I lift Lou and lay her on the open sleeping bag, a whimper escapes her mouth.

“Hey, it’s okay, Lou.” I don’t know if I should be happy she’s waking up now. I can’t possibly put her in the sleeping bag in her wet clothes, besides, she needs warmth from the outside, that’s the first rule of hypothermia. And since she’s incapable of drinking hot tea, the skin-to-skin-contact method will work best.

With a sigh, I kneel beside her and rip the seams of the sweater with one jerk, too impatient to take it off her.

She moans and tosses her head from side to side without opening her eyes.

“Nothing is going to happen,” I murmur dully, knowing what she’s thinking.

As if she understood me, she keeps her head still. I climb over her legs, quickly unlace her shoes, and pull them off her feet along with her socks.

Her right ankle is badly swollen and dark blue. I wrap my hand around her toes, feeling like I’m reaching into a freezer. “Oh, goddamn, what the fuck!” Cursing under my breath, I pull off her wet jeans and panties. Rather randomly, my gaze darts over her naked body, but I’m far too worried to think of anything else. I take my clothes off, too, keeping only my boxer shorts on—the only piece of clothing still dry. Then, I crawl into the sleeping bag next to Lou and zip it all the way up.

It immediately gets warmer and I realize how cold I have been all this time. I carefully inch toward Lou and roll her onto her side to pull her close to me, so close I can feel her freezing back against my stomach.

With a tormented gasp, she tries to crawl away from me, but I won’t let her. Gently, but firmly, I bring her back.

“I know you don't like this, but it has to be done.” Her body is still icy. Her bare bottom presses against my abdomen through my embrace and I smell her wet hair. It smells of rain with a hint of lemon. Goose bumps trickle down my spine, but I don’t know if it’s caused by Lou’s freezing body temperature or her proximity.

For a moment, she lies still as if she has surrendered to her fate. It must be terrible for her: completely naked and so close to me that not even a piece of paper would fit between us.

I beg my body not to have thoughts of its own. Tense, I listen to her breathing, which becomes more and more hectic before she tries to slide away from me a second time.

"Relax." I put one leg over her, which is just enough to immobilize her. Moreover, I don't feel her bottom as intensely any longer.

Good! Better! Definitely better!

In the crowded sleeping bag, I reach for her arms and cross them over her chest so she doesn't feel so vulnerable. "Just relax. You are hypothermic. Another hour and you wouldn't have made it."

Lou takes a few deep breaths as if trying to calm herself. I don't know how much she even understands. I'm about to say something else when I hear a faint slippery sound.

Of course! Grey! How could I have forgotten him. Previously, he was warming himself by the fire, but now he seems to feel left out and happily licks Lou's face. I scold him briefly and then let him crawl into our sleeping bag. He immediately snuggles up to Lou's side and whines. It sounds a bit reproachful, like he's asking her why she left him, and Lou sobs. The sound pierces my core and awakens a strange longing in me.

I pull my arms around her like ropes, feeling her back against my stomach. The relief of having found her suddenly washes over me like a monumental wave.

"Everything will be fine, Lou," I say quietly, only now realizing how exhausted I am. Every muscle is on fire and my skull is pounding in time with my pulse. "All is well. I've found you. You're okay." My throat is so tight again I can barely speak. As if a million tears were blocking it. "I won't hurt you. I won't touch you. I merely want to keep you warm, that's all."

I am so unspeakably glad that nothing happened to her. So incredibly glad my prayers were answered for once. I want to scream out loud to get rid of all the tension, but I stay still and press my cheek against Lou's hair. I feel her muscles relaxing and her body softening against mine. In this tiny, tiny slice of my life, everything is perfect for the first time. It's not only because I'm holding Lou in my

arms, so intimately, gently, and close, but because today feels like I've done something right for the first time.

I lie there for a long time, my body a shell around hers, and listen to the night. The fire crackles next to us and the tarp flaps in the wind. In the far distance, barely audible, a few coyotes bark in the deep forest. I think of nothing but this moment. Maybe this is happiness. At least that's how I imagine it. In this moment, there is no room for doubt, Jordan Price, or Thorson Ave, this moment is just the way it is and it's perfect.

Lost in thought, I breathe into Lou's hair believing she's asleep, when she stirs in my arms.

"Bren…" Her hoarse whisper vibrates against my chest. "Thank you. Thank you for saving me…"

At first, I can't reply at all. I'm afraid that the bittersweet pain, this intense longing for her, will tear me apart. I take a few deep breaths.

"It was nothing, Lou," I whisper back, pulling her even closer to me. Suddenly, I have this insane feeling that I am connected to her by something as large as fate. It's like I'll always find her again if she's lost to me. As if we both belong together and as if we've even known each other long before. Like Lou was mine before I found her and I have belonged to her for as long as I can remember. Even back on Thorson Ave.

If I hadn't thought of the word *girls' hearts* on that icy winter day by the lake, I might have found Lou at a different time. Or she me. Just as two parts of a whole always come together, as if following an unwritten law. Perhaps we are also like two sides of a coin, fundamentally different, yet one. Two expressions of one thing, like laughter and crying, or light and dark.

Or maybe I'm merely too tired and too happy to see things as they are.

Despite being exhausted, I don't allow myself to sleep so I can monitor Lou's condition. Eventually, she grows restless, wriggling and shaking in my arms.

"Bren…cold…" she murmurs, half asleep. Her teeth chatter. "C-cold."

I hold her tighter and soothingly stroke her arms that are crossed in front of her chest.

"It's okay, Lou. The tremor is a good sign. Your body is reacting to the cold again, waking up. It'll be over soon."

She nestles into my embrace like she trusts my every word. Again, I feel so strange, as if this is all a sweet, yet at the same time, almost frightening dream.

When I'm certain she's sound asleep, I crawl out of the sleeping bag. It is as bitterly cold as at the beginning of winter. I quickly put on my change of clothes and slip into my dried jacket, then I carefully put Lou in a thick sweater.

I find a large rock, place it on the flames, and use its surface as a stovetop to boil water for tea and oatmeal. Nothing greasy, otherwise her body will lose heat again through digestion.

I fill the thermos that was still in the backpack with half the boiling water and place a bag of mint tea in it. The other half, I pour over the oatmeal mixture.

I sit by the fire for a while, stirring the oatmeal and watching Lou sleep. This physical closeness between us has wrapped me in a cloak that allows me to see the world with different eyes. It seems safer to me now and bigger at the same time. I can breathe more freely as the steel ring around my chest is gone. Maybe it was that feeling I was waiting for when I first saw the ocean back in Los Angeles.

Lost in thought, I add a few birch branches when I hear Lou's voice.

"Bren…"

"Lou!" I look over at her in astonishment and only see her head and the shock of blonde hair. "How do you feel?"

"Frozen," she murmurs dully.

I chuckle because I'm so relieved that she's already joking. "Do you feel any pain?"

It's quiet for a while and I almost think she's gone back to sleep.

"My ankle," she says weakly at some point.

"I saw it. It's swollen and blue. I'll wrap it later." I carefully pull the spoon out of the mush and blow on it a few times.

Lou turns her head so I can see her face. "How did you find me?"

I lower the spoon and smile because her appreciative tone warms my stomach as if I'd swallowed the oatmeal myself. I push my hair back in embarrassment. "Grey found you."

Lou's eyes close. "But…the cliff…"

I stir the oatmeal without tasting it. "Grey found where you went down. Or rather, fell?"

She nods.

"You must have had a whole company of guardian angels. I rappelled with Grey. He didn't like it all that much. He even peed all over my pants."

She smiles and I can only think of how special she is to me. "Grey lost track of you along the river, so I figured you were on the other side," I explain, sitting next to her with the pot.

In the glow of the fire, her cheeks are rosy as if having color, but the light can be deceiving. I nod to the pot in my hands with my chin. "I made some oatmeal. It's not a culinary masterpiece, but it will do the job."

"I can't eat."

"You need to."

Lou wants to burrow herself in the sleeping bag, but I beat her to it. I gently pull her up and tuck the woolen blanket behind her back so her upper body is a little elevated. Then I put the spoon to her lips, amazed at how willingly she lets herself be fed.

After taking a few more sips of tea, she curls up into a ball and snuggles deeper into the sleeping bag. I scrape the last of the leftovers out of the pot and eat while watching her.

Suddenly, I'm afraid this closeness between us might only last until the early morning. Maybe then we'll wake up and everything will be as it was before. It may not be until tomorrow that Lou realizes that although I saved her life, her escape was unsuccessful. She'll probably distance herself again and see me for who I truly am.

A kidnapper, a bad person.

Good people do good things. Tonight, I got something right for the first time, but that might not mean anything. Because if I hadn't kidnapped Lou, she would never have been in this danger.

Lost in thought, I go to the river and rinse out the pot before putting away the things I hurriedly dumped out.

"Bren…"

Her voice brings me back to the moment that just seemed so perfect to me.

"What about the drops…was it…very bad?"

I pause mid-move. "I'm fine." My head is still spinning and I know I'm a lot more exhausted than I'm willing to admit, but she doesn't need to know that.

"You sound tired…"

I suppress a smile. "Of course I'm tired. But not from the aftereffects of the drops… Anyway, get some sleep before I have to give you some." I put the thermos in my backpack and pause again. "Lou, I was kidding," I add quickly, looking over at her.

She snuggles back in and stifles a yawn. "I know."

I can't sleep that night. I sit by the fire, not knowing what to think. Which of Lou's feelings are real and which ones is she merely imagining?

I poke around in the embers, watching the eastern sky. The blackness gives way to a slate gray with narrow orange-red bands running through it.

Only now do I get an inkling of where we ended up. We're still on my land, though close to state territory. If we go further upstream, we'll come to Quiet Lake after a while. However, we'd first have to overcome the cliffs. I can't do that with Lou on my back and she won't be able to pull herself up on her own.

In my mind, I travel downriver. A few days' march from here, there is a gap within the rocks. It is narrow with a stream running through it. You can stretch your arms to each side and reach the rough stones with your fingertips. If you walk along it, after a while you come to a point where it goes up. From there you reach the

logging road and from it the turnout. It would be a long detour, and with it almost being September, temperatures fall daily and every night can turn into a struggle to survive.

I look at Lou, frowning. I'll have to carry her, which won't make it any easier, and I'm not sure the milk will last that long for Grey. I could try feeding him jerky.

Tired, I wipe my face and wish I'd slept for at least an hour. Feeling stiff, I dismantle the tarp in the chill of the morning and carefully roll it up. Then, I cook Lou oatmeal and put it in a bowl. I also give some to Grey, who is lying next to me by the fire. At some point, it occurs to me that I, too, need to eat something even if I don't have an appetite. I take a few sips of water straight from the river and mechanically stuff myself with some hard, bone-dry crackers.

When the sky is bright blue, I go through my backpack for the fresh clothes for Lou.

She's lounging in the sleeping bag, and when I look her way, our eyes meet. She doesn't appear to hate me and a smile creeps across my lips. Maybe her feelings aren't imaginary?

As Grey greets her at length, I covertly watch her. Drowsy, she sits up and looks around.

Her eyes widen and I wonder what she's feeling when she sees the valley. Her gaze follows the light green river, the wide pebble banks to the silver grasses, the white forest hyacinths, and the shadow flowers. It continues further and further through the forest-lined valley and finally gets stuck on the snow-capped mountain giants on the horizon—mountains that seem so close but are a great many miles away.

Nature soothes me as if every thought were lost here.

"A special kind of peace, isn't it?" I say. "It seems like nothing and no one can hurt you here."

Lou just nods, though there is a curious sparkle in her eyes. Maybe she's like me when I first came to this place. Back when I didn't know how much the loneliness eats at the soul and that in the Yukon, not only would my past fade, but so would I.

"Where are we?"

Smiling, I pull a pair of jeans and one of her sweaters out of the backpack, but I don't answer.

"Bren, where are we?" She sounds impatient.

I shrug. "Somewhere in Canada." I toss her the clothes. "Put them on and then I'll take care of your foot…oh, yeah"—I rub my nose, a little embarrassed—"unfortunately, I don't have dry underpants."

I don't know why I don't want to tell her where we are. The Yukon feels like a secret I can't share with anyone—as if I'd be desecrating its magic.

While Lou changes clothes in the shelter of the sleeping bag, I extinguish the fire with dirt from the forest and put pebbles on top.

"How did you get all that stuff?" she asks, pulling her sweater over her head.

"When I woke up, you were gone," I say, unable to entirely avoid the accusatory undertone. "I knew you wouldn't survive out here on your own. What you were up to was madness!" I remember the oatmeal I set aside for her and hand the bowl to her. "You should eat that before we head back. It's still warm. I also have tea in the thermos."

She wolfs it down like she's starving. I can't make myself look away. If only I knew what she's thinking and how she's really doing.

I remember the necklace I found on the rock. That night, I stowed it in the bottom of the backpack, but I want to fix it before I give it back to her.

Lou glances over at me as if she caught me eyeing her. A shy look. I can't interpret it.

She blinks. "So, how did you end up finding me, at the cliff I mean?"

"It was obvious that you'd orient yourself along the stream. Enough drinking water and a guarantee you wouldn't walk in circles." I reach for the tarp and tie it to the backpack. "When you ran off at the gorge again, I went back to get Grey to help find you. I knew a storm was approaching."

"So, you quickly packed everything you needed to survive and set out to find…"

"Killer of the unprepared."

"What?" Lou stares at me.

"Killer of the unprepared. It's a term for death by hypothermia. In Canada, it catches a few tourists every year. Windy and wet climate with temperatures around forty degrees are the best conditions." I eye her somberly, feeling a touch of anger I don't want to feel. "What were you thinking? Running through the wilderness at night and even crossing a river… I thought you couldn't swim." With a bitter taste in my mouth, I shake my head.

"Well, I can't," Lou whispers. "But what choice did I have?"

Something in my stomach convulses. "None, I guess," I reply far too harshly and far too mockingly. "It seems I'm more terrible than death." Better not to get used to the feeling of closeness. Better not to let hope hurt me.

Without paying any more attention to her, I pack the sucked-empty breakfast bag. "I've already fed Grey. I'll wrap your ankle and then take you back."

A strange sound comes out of Lou's mouth, maybe not a real sound at all, but a shaky breath.

"Back? Back to where?"

My hand, reaching to close the backpack buckle, stops mid-air. I realize what I said. Lou's question hangs between us, leaving a thick silence.

"To the RV, of course, where else?" I say after a moment as if it were a matter of fact. I pull the leather strap through the loop and stare at the buckle.

"Of course," I hear Lou whisper next to me, hoarsely as if speaking against a flood of tears.

Crap! I can almost physically feel her desperation, cutting into my gut, tugging at my heart. I have to say something to her. Something to comfort her because it's not her damn fault she's sad, it's mine.

"Lou?" I whisper softly, looking at her. She sits hunched on the sleeping bag, rocking back and forth, tears rolling down her face.

My throat starts to burn. "You thought something would change because I drank that stuff, didn't you?" I ask hoarsely.

She nods and keeps looking at me, crying.

"I'm sorry." From far away, I hear my voice echo. *Everything's kind of easy for you, isn't it?*

"I wish I could let you go," I say honestly. "I wish I could show you what you mean to me."

"So do it!" she sobs through tears.

"I can't." I look past her to the golden willow tree on the other bank. Just the thought drains me and leaves me empty. I cannot do it. I will never be able to.

I notice she tries to lock eyes with me, but I keep staring past her. "M-maybe…maybe someday?" she asks haltingly.

"I took the drug because I was a danger to you," I reply softly. "I was in the middle of a blackout and anything is better than hurting you. At that moment, even losing you is better than hurting you or you falling." I force myself to look at her again, as to do otherwise would be cowardly and unfair. Only cowards look the other way.

Her shoulders tremble and she wraps her arms around herself, a lonely consolation. "Maybe someday? Bren," she repeats and there's an unbearable helplessness in her words. "Please tell me…maybe someday? Only someday."

She looks at me. I can't stand that look. She believes in something in me. She could make me a good person. A good person who does good things that he fears. She could make me who I would have been if my stepfather hadn't existed.

I smile sadly because I don't think I can ever overcome those shadows.

I silently wrap her ankle, but her words haunt me the entire time. It tears me up hearing her cry, knowing I could change it. I think of my answered prayers that night and my promise to make things better for her even though she probably didn't hear it. I think about how she spoke to me every time I had a flashback. She brought me back with words I can't even remember.

When I'm done, I look up at her. How to make it better for someone?

I gently place my hand on her wet cheek. I stroke her skin with my thumb, wiping away the tears still streaming down her face.

I always thought hope could break a person. But maybe that's not true. Maybe it's also hope that keeps us alive for so long even when all we see is darkness. Was I hopeful back on Thorson Ave? If yes, for how long? I can no longer recall. But maybe it's not important at all. This is about Lou and all she needs right now is a light.

I take a deep breath, look at her, holding her gaze. "*Maybe* can mean never—and someday ten years." She swallows and trembles. "So, okay…Lou." I wipe a few more tears from her face. "Maybe someday. Maybe someday. But don't ever ask me that again."

CHAPTER 26

In the late afternoon, at the point where the river grows into a dark blue lake, I carefully put Lou down. "We can stay here for the night. It's a good spot." I wipe the sweat from my forehead with my forearm. I walked all day without taking a break so we can be back at the RV before the start of September, however, we didn't get as far as I had hoped.

"Why is this a good place?" Lou asks, looking at the low embankment on our left side. "It looks like any other place along the way."

"Because grizzlies don't fish for salmon in lakes, but rather in rapids where the fish jump to get upstream." Exhausted, I unbuckle the backpack I was carrying across my stomach and drop onto the sandy ground.

"Are there a lot of bears around here?" Lou looks at me like a frightened rabbit and I want to hug her like last night.

"Of course. About fifteen thousand. But it's much more likely for you to meet a human than a bear, so don't worry." I have to laugh at her half-angry, half-amused expression.

"Great!" she growls, limping away from me and sitting in the sand.

"Just leave the sweater on," I tell her when I see her trying to pull it over her head.

She stops in mid-movement.

"You might think it's warm, but the wind will chill you."

"I'm sweating!" she snaps a little angrily.

"Then keep sweating. That's good after you nearly froze to death last night."

"What about you?" Lou taps her upper arm with the edge of her hand and I know she means my shirt.

"I worked hard and carried you. I can afford to walk around like this." I grin at her. Lou pulls at her hair. Since it's chin length, she's been doing this more often when she's angry or tense, which I'm just realizing.

"Bren…"

"Yes?"

"Thanks again. I mean, for carrying me and everything."

Shaking my head, I get up and unpack the sleeping bag so Lou can sit down on something warm. "It's not like I can leave you here, right?"

She remains silent and I start to prepare for the evening. I set up the tarp and fill an empty Coke can that I find in my backpack with small pebbles. "To help you with your fear," I say to Lou. "Rattle the can while I get wood."

"I thought there are no bears here."

"I said grizzlies don't fish as much in lakes as they do in rapids, I didn't say they don't at all."

With that, I leave her alone and collect a load of firewood in the thicket of the forest. As for the bears, I'm not concerned as there are no fresh tracks near the water.

Later, when the campfire is burning, Lou prepares the milk for Grey while I carve a spear out of birch wood.

"Going hunting?" Lou cuts a hole in the breakfast bag and nods toward the wooden stick, which I sharpen at one end.

"Salmon."

"Like a grizzly, then."

"Kind of." I tap the tip of the spear, looking straight at Lou.

She smiles shyly and looks down at her feet. Maybe it's that shyness, but something gives me hope again that her feelings might be real.

Once my spear is ready, I take off my shoes, roll up my pant legs and walk barefoot toward the dark blue lake. The sand is cool and soft, broken only by a narrow carpet of delphiniums, Indian paintbrush, and yarrow.

A flock of swans is floating on the surface, further back in the water, while flocks of cranes and wild geese pass overhead.

Lou may not realize it, but I see signs of autumn coming with every breath of nature. It's not only the screams of the geese in the sky; the willows and poplars are already glowing green gold and the air carries a hint of mold besides the fresh scent of spruce.

Spear in hand, I step into the cold water and wade upstream where the river meets the lake. I remain motionless on a steep slope, the spear already in the water so as not to be fooled by its reflection on the surface of the water when I strike.

At first, nothing whatsoever happens, but after a while, the fish seem to have accepted me as a natural obstacle and swim through my straddled legs. I persevere with numb feet, glad that I perfected the maneuver during my first summer exploring my leasehold land.

By evening, the fish are often tired and easier to catch once you get used to the rhythm of their routine. I'm about to thrust when I sense movement on the bank. Confused, I look at the golden poplar. Lou is standing by the tree suckers, watching me lost in thought. Her hair is almost the same color as the leaves on the tree. Her sweater and pants blend into the dark bark.

She fits so well in the Yukon. Tenderness creeps into my heart, and without realizing it, I smile in her direction. Lou smiles back. Again with that shy reserve behind which she hides. I don't know why, but it's this reticence that touches me so much.

Lou watches me for a while longer, then limps back to the spread-out sleeping bag.

I look down at the bottom of the lake again and remember how much she cried after my promise this morning. Much more than the time before. All day, I've been wondering why without finding an answer until now. I only know one thing for certain: part of her crying has been stuck deep inside me since then and it feels like her tears continue to flow there.

The wind blows cold and softly through the spruce trees and the last yellow light of the day fades in the western sky. I caught two salmon and grilled them over the flames using thick logs. After deboning them, I cut them into pieces and hand Lou her half in a tin bowl.

"Is the head in there?" she asks cautiously, eyeing the pink fish flesh with a frown.

"Of course! Including the brain and eyes," I scoff and sit next to her on the sand. Teasing Lou amuses me to no end. Mainly because it's so easy to upset her. It may be unfair since I am superior to her in nature, then again, it makes her smile—I owe her that much.

I grin when I see her poking at the pieces of fish with her fork, looking like she's searching for a gooey eye. "Lou, that was a joke. I make it a rule not to eat anything that can still look at me, dead or not."

She lowers the fork. "Oh…" I get the smile I want, but only momentarily.

We eat in silence. The night deepens over the forest and the lake with every passing minute. The wind, which had previously rustled the tops of the spruce trees, dies down as if giving way to darkness.

"It's delicious," Lou says, following my gaze toward the trees.

How strange the mood is between us. No hostility at all and no suspicions either. It has changed, gradually but steadily, like nature, like autumn, which I can smell and taste before it fully reveals itself.

After dinner, Lou suddenly gets up, hobbles in my socks to the lake, and sits on the shore. My down jacket is slung over her shoulders, but it's too big and Lou almost drowns in it.

I leave her alone for a while and watch the army of stars twinkle down on us from the night sky.

Girls' hearts.

Again the words that changed everything. But today things are different than they were back then in winter. Lou isn't who she used to be and, I realize, probably never was. I only saw what I wanted to see.

A girl who is my counterpart. A girl who takes everything easy. A girl standing in the light. I thought I knew everything about her, but I've never been so wrong.

Out of the need to be close to her, I go to the water and sit next to her.

She doesn't move, but continues to stare at the night-black lake, on the surface of which the reflection of the moon shines brightly. It looks like someone poured silver liquid into it, which now floats on the water as a sparkling disk.

I look furtively at Lou. Who am I to her? Still her cold-blooded kidnapper? But here, in the heart of the Yukon, away from the RV, the chains, and little bell bracelets, that hardly seems real anymore. Lou will not run away because she would be lost on her own. Besides, she's injured. For the first time, I can relax in her presence without having to monitor her every move. Maybe she feels relieved. Maybe that is what's different between us now.

I take my eyes off her and follow her gaze out onto the lake, directed at some invisible point.

"This is your land, isn't it?" she says suddenly into the stillness of the night.

I'm honestly surprised. "What made you think that?"

"I saw a sign. Private property. Do not enter."

I almost forgot the sign my predecessors put up on the shore. She must have noticed it while crossing the river. "Legally, it doesn't belong to me." I grab a large pebble and turn it in one hand. "I'm leasing this land. That's why I'm allowed to hunt and fish. Otherwise, it is strictly forbidden. Conservation and whatnot."

Lou raises her eyebrows. "So you're renting it all? How much land are we talking about?"

A lot of land, a lot of land. So much, you probably wouldn't be able to escape anyway. "I forget the exact square footage. I know the boundaries, that's all I need to know," I answer evasively.

As I speak, I see something flash in Lou's eyes. "When you said you were away all summer…you were always here on your land?"

I nod, realizing how little she knows about me. Next to nothing, really.

"How many summers?"

"Three." Why haven't I ever told her about myself? Did I think it wouldn't interest her or scare her even more?

Lou looks at me as if she can see inside me and wraps her arms around her knees. “You’ve been coming here ever since you accidentally killed that man.”

Jordan Price pops up in my mind like a blackberry thorn that’s embedded in you and resurfaces after a long time. “Quite astute.” *And remembers everything*.

Lou bites her lip. “I don’t have much else to think about when I’m not busy planning an escape.”

In my mind, I see myself standing in the run-down basement, hearing the silence after Jordan falls. My head is clouded with the adrenaline from the fight and the dismayed murmuring doesn’t reach me. The only things I notice are Jordan’s grotesquely twisted neck and the smell of cigarette smoke and medicinal cooling ointment. When I come to, Buzz is maneuvering me through several back rooms, his words raining down on me. *You need to get out of here now!* Screams erupt elsewhere. Jordan’s brothers. *We’re gonna kill you! We’ll make you eat your guts! Murderer!* Minutes pass before I realize Jordan is dead.

As I think about it, a tremor runs through me that has nothing to do with the chilly night. I shudder and pull my legs up against my body. “Back then, I just wanted to get away,” I say, staring at the darkened lakeshore as if there was something there that could ease my guilt. “Leave everything behind. Forget everything.”

Lou doesn’t stop looking at me. It’s almost as if our roles have been reversed. “What do you mean, everything?”

A part of me wants to get up and flee into the darkness of the forest, but then I remember that Lou deserves to know more. “The fighting, the life in the slums,” I finally answer, trying to be expressionless as I raise my head.

“You’re from the slums?”

You can see the effort she makes not to appear shocked, but I still don’t manage to keep acting so emotionlessly.

“Not really.” My voice is somber. “I fled there. And then I lived there for a few years, yes.”

“So, where are you from?”

"Los Angeles. I was only twelve when I managed to flee my home." I think of the pounding ocean at the Santa Monica Pier and stupidly of Rhode Island, too. I quickly suppress the thought and go on talking: "I tried several times, but the police always picked me up. Eventually, I figured I would be safe in the slums. Even the cops don't want to go into that neighborhood."

"Safer—the slums?" Lou shakes her head so hard her hair whips her cheeks. "It's like crossing a river when you can't swim."

"I see the parallel." I force a laugh.

A long silence ensues as we stare at the moonlit lake and Lou warms her feet with her hands.

"So, what were those fights you were talking about?" she asks after a while. "Were they always about money?"

"Some kind of fight scout spotted me," I say cheerily, thinking about the fight between the Bones and the Black Bloods, after which Buzz had approached me.

"A fight scout?"

"That is someone who secretly scouts out the strongest in gang-rivalry battles to hire for underground fights. It's about money. A lot of money." So much money that some are talked into fights they could never win. Young men like Jordan, for example. I grab a handful of pebbles and throw them into the water one by one. "There are no rules, similar to mixed martial arts fights. Everything is allowed except guns. But unlike mixed martial arts fights, the underground fights are illegal. There are no restrictions. The stakes are high and only the winner decides what happens to the loser."

"What's supposed to happen?" Lou wants to know, looking at me, confused.

"You mean besides the risk of dying during a fight?"

She nods and seems to come to shocking realizations. I almost regret telling her so much.

"There are a few practices that are popular." I study her, then look out over the shimmering lake again. No, there are things I can't tell her. "You don't want to know, trust me."

"Have you ever lost?"

"Nope."

"Never?"

"Never."

"That's why you have enough money to lease the property."

I shrug. "It's dirty money. I have someone who washes it for me."

"Oh…" Her eyes widen and I honestly wonder what part it is that upsets her. I kidnapped her. Dirty money, on the other hand, is…as minor as pickpocketing compared to robbery.

"I told you I'm not a good person."

Her gaze locks with mine and seems frozen. "Have you ever made a terrible decision about what should happen to your opponent after a fight?" Her expression gives nothing away, but her body stiffens. I see that despite the down jacket over her shoulders.

"Never. I swear."

"It must have been awful living like that," she whispers and I hear restraint in her voice again, as if she doesn't want to show her true feelings.

I shake my head. "Not for me. The violence and the poverty—both were better than what I had faced before."

We both know that *before* denotes the time my flashbacks are from. I just can't tell what Lou knows about it.

We fall silent again and watch the ducks swim past us.

"So you left when you had enough money?" Lou asks after a while.

I toss the last pebble into the water and watch it sink with a soft plop. "I rented a decent apartment when I was eighteen. I would have continued that life if it hadn't been for the incident." *And of course the flashbacks*. I shake my head at myself. "It was only then that I realized what I was actually doing. I never wanted to kill anyone, I just didn't care about my own life."

"You didn't care about your life?" Lou's tone reveals disbelief and bewilderment.

I stare at the moon's gleaming reflection, rising and falling with a few ripples in the water, and think of the days of my youth. "There was nothing I wanted to live for. Maybe that's why I was so good. I was never scared during a fight. I always risked everything because

death was an acceptable option. I never truly emerged from the darkness until I found you." I give Lou a challenging look, but I don't feel like I can actually take her on.

Lou meets my gaze, her eyes shining deep and dark like the lake, curious, not dismissive. "When was that?"

"About a year ago." A shadow of a smile crosses my face. Again, I reach for the pebble-lined bank and grab a handful of stones, enclosing them in my fist. "Three years ago, I gave notice on the apartment and bought the RV. I wanted to leave, just drive off. I had enough money. A month later, I ended up here and stayed for the summer."

"And in winter?"

"The two winters prior to that one, I spent in a small town. This past winter I spent here. The property comes with an old log cabin by the lake. It's small, but spacious enough to survive in."

Lou stares at me like she doesn't understand anything anymore. "Why didn't you take me there?"

"I'm still going to." The thought of wintering with Lou at Quiet Lake, watching the wolves on the lake at night and sleeping with her in the fur bed makes me smile. "In the middle of winter, the inside of the RV gets too cold to survive. You asked me about it once, remember?"

Lou nods. "Yes, I remember now."

"The house is on a lake and you can only get there on foot. It's a long way and even more deserted than here. I had been alone there for four months last winter." In my mind, I hear the Chinook howling over the mountain peaks and a chill runs through my limbs. By God, I never want to be as lonely as I was during those cold four months ever again.

"Did you find me then?" Lou asks bluntly.

"I had a laptop. The connection was bad, only a few hours a day, and the generator was always acting up because of the cold. But in winter, it was paradise. I've dreamed of showing it to you one day."

I think about the many weeks that Lou's posts got me through that freezing, ice-cold winter. How many times was I standing at the window of the cabin and imagining she was with me and I could

show her all the hidden magic of winter. She doesn't even know that she saved my life and I can't tell her, either. I don't think she would understand. Who could?

For a moment that could also be an eternity, we look at each other. Lou's eyes still shimmer, so blue and unfathomable, full of questions and feelings that she doesn't express. It almost seems to me as if I am seeing the images of winter in them. My bridge to her. The snow-covered sky, the glittering crystals in the air, the mist dancing over the lake like a disembodied ghost. Before I can stop myself, I tell her about the Yukon winter. About the lake freezing over and its eerie melody, the deep red winter sun, the gigantic shadows and the ice crystals floating over the lake like diamond dust. I tell her how this land first saved me, then made me sick, and how lonely I was.

When I finish, I feel drained and realize Lou is looking at me oddly. Maybe now she finally thinks I'm crazy. Who spends their winters alone in the wilderness? Or his whole life? Automatically, I squeeze the pebbles in my hand as if to pulverize them.

Lou gently shakes her head and wraps her fingers around my clenched fist. Her gentle touch makes me freeze, like the first time she hugged me in the RV.

"Have you ever had any friends?" she asks quietly. "Or a girl you wanted?"

"Relationships mean someone can leave you. I couldn't bear the thought of being abandoned, so I built a wall around myself." My voice is monotonous.

"And with me it's not there?" She gently opens my stiff fingers and the pebbles fall out. Something inside me is trembling to its core. A shadow of fear claws at my soul.

"No," I whisper hoarsely.

"Why not?" she whispers back.

"Because I made sure you can't leave me," I whisper again. "I don't need to protect myself that much. Ever since I saw you… everything has been different." I swallow hard, trying to regain my composure. "It was…like I could see everything through your eyes…

life and stuff. You were like a beam of light in a dark cave." I hate what I'm saying, even if it's true.

My fingers close into a fist on their own accord, but Lou pushes against it, forming a bowl out of my hand. I don't know when she moved toward me, but she's suddenly so close I can feel her breath on my cheek. My throat constricts and my eyes hurt like I have grains of sand in them. I still want her so bad.

"Today, I would do everything differently." I squeeze her hand tightly. "Today, I wouldn't kidnap you. I wouldn't drug you… I wouldn't touch you…" I swallow against the tightness in my throat. "But it's too late. I can't go back. I don't want to lose you. Especially not now that I really know you. At first, it was merely the thought that you could make me happy, but now I know for sure." The moment I say the words I see the truth. I've never wished so much to turn back time, back to the moment Lou got into my RV.

I stare at the other shore of the lake and feel bitterness and contempt rising in me. What all could I have said?

Do you want something to drink? Do you want to kiss? Do you want an adventure? Want to run away with me?

There would have been endless questions, but I didn't ask her a single one.

"Bren?" Lou pulls her fingers back. "I don't think you're a bad person."

Hearing these words, I turn to her and feel lonelier and colder than winter itself.

"Apart from kidnapping me, I mean." She dares a smile.

I try to smile back even though I know she's wrong. People don't change. If I were a good person, I should set Lou free.

Lou's words haunt me as I haul the backpack up a tree so the bears can't get to it, and stay with me as I set up two sleeping spots by the fire. How can she say I'm not a bad person when she knows what I've done?

Too bad you don't want to find out who you really are.

Dr. Watts' sentence flashes through my mind. I wonder who I would have become had it not been for my stepfather. Would I have gone to college and studied art? Or maybe I would have turned into

a pompous ass like Andrew from *Hero of the Week*? Would I still have turned out a loner? Who am I really?

I can't find any answers and just stare at the flickering sky, following the stars of the Big Dipper. Alioth, Mizar, and Alkaid on the handle.

Girls' hearts.

I just want Lou's.

More than anything, I want a chance.

I listen to the night and hear her breathing next to me. I carefully peek over at her. She is lying on her back, facing the stars. The light of the fire plays with her hair and orange-red light reflections dance on it like fiery spirits.

I would like to crawl into her sleeping bag and hold her like last night. Just the thought of her nearness makes me shudder with fear and joy. I have so many things to think about. About so many answers that I owe her.

"Lou…are you still awake?" One of the dumbest questions ever.

"Yes."

I pull myself together. She asked me that recently and I didn't tell her because she was so scared. I thought at the time that truth meant closeness and I think she's ready for it now. "You were always yearning for something to happen, weren't you?"

The stillness of the night suddenly deepens as if a false bottom opened up.

"What do you mean?" Lou asks and I hear trepidation in her voice.

"I once told you that there was another reason why I kidnapped you." I pause for a moment. "You wanted something to take you out of your life and lift you up like an eagle. You wanted something to turn you inside out and leave you as someone you wouldn't recognize. Something that made your heart glow. You longed for that, didn't you?"

Lou doesn't answer and her silence stretches out like the infinite space above our heads.

"I just wanted you to know, Lou," I say softly at one point, looking over at her. She lies still, like an Egyptian mummy, not

moving.

Hopefully, it wasn't too much truth for one night.

Sighing inwardly, I stare at the sky again. Megrez, Phecda, Merak, and Dubhe, I complete the constellation of the Big Dipper and search for Spica, the brightest star of Virgo, which can be found by following the handle outward in an arc.

But even as my gaze wanders down the line, the points of light blur as if the firmament was not clear. A red veil wafts through the air like a flag that has broken loose from a pole and is now floating slowly across the sky. The edges flutter and shimmer, and suddenly, the whole night is filled with this poppy-red light.

For a split second, I have déjà vu. The glow reminds me of the moment I was standing in the parking lot with Lou, staring at her bare shoulder. That touch of distrust in her that was wiped away by the opening of the sky and the red evening sun.

I sit up and look over at her. Her eyes are wide like those of an astonished child as she looks up spellbound.

"Northern lights," I explain, rising slowly enough not to snap Lou out of the moment.

With my head thrown back, I take a few steps toward the lake while the lights flow together in the sky. The red flag becomes a surging sea. Shreds of light fly away and atomize in the dark like sparks.

A cold shiver runs down my spine. Is it destiny that Lou and I are always accompanied by light phenomena? Is it fate that Lou, of all people, was supposed to buy lanterns—bringer of light—before I kidnapped her?

I allow myself to be distracted and look over at her, but she hasn't moved an inch.

When I look up again, the sky is filled with a thousand and one colors, a web of lights in pale pink, pastel green, dark purple, and red. Wild pathways race from one end of the firmamental arc to the other, dancing with the wind and night, following a rhythm that I understand as little as I do myself.

At some point, the colored lights tumble like colorful Mikado sticks, the lines of light fade, until eventually, there is only a clear,

light green.

I look at Lou again. She still hasn't said anything about the northern lights or my disclosure. I think today was simply too much for her.

I quietly return to camp, grab the blanket, and sit down on the bank. Lou's voice echoes in my head.

I don't think you're a bad person.

I gaze thoughtfully across the lake, which is now reflecting the light of the starry sky again and reach for a few smooth pebbles.

Who are you, Brendan?

In any case, I'm no longer the same person who drugged Lou cold-bloodedly in June. So, if I'm not that Brendan anymore, then I have to let Lou go. My stomach turns into a hard rock and I feel the latch trying to lock something deep inside me.

I close my eyes and try to get a glimpse of it—but all I can find is the dark room where I met the boy during my last flashes.

This time, I'm standing in front of it.

I am you, I whisper through an invisible door into the darkness. *Even if you don't show yourself, I am you*.

Silence. Without a flash, the place appears deserted. Maybe it only exists when I drift off. I'm mentally trying to open the door when the echo of a voice zips through my mind.

Grief. Too heavy for you. You'll break.

That was before, I reply calmly. *Today, it's going to be fine*.

I need to get through to the boy behind the door. I feel like he's the key to all my fears. However, the more I try to relax and release the latch, the more that spot in me tightens.

After a while, I give up and toss the pebbles back into the lake. Maybe Dr. Watts was right and there is more to my seizures than flashbacks.

CHAPTER 27

Never in my life have I felt as vulnerable as I do these days, never before has anyone been as close to me as Lou. The fear and joy I have felt when she has approached me on her own accord floats close to the surface. She makes me laugh—and scares me like a child who reaches out for closeness but is afraid of rejection.

Now, even I have no sense of time anymore. The days consist of hours of power marches, during which I carry Lou on my back and occasionally put Grey in my backpack to move faster.

Toward evening, we rest on the shore of the nameless lake and I catch a few salmon. I often find Lou watching me, lost in thought and bathed in yellow-gold evening light, similar to her lawn dance in Ash Springs. We don't talk much. The interaction between us grows silent. Illusion or reality, I don't know.

Yesterday, she asked me why I always kept a fire burning at summer camp even in the morning.

"Because of the wild animals," I replied. "I want to keep them away from camp."

"Maybe you want to keep something else out," she murmured as if aware of my need for light and warmth.

It's a bit like we're trapped in a delicate bubble. Every furtive glance echoes inside of it without escaping. A strange tension vibrates in the air, intensifying day by day. It raises the hairs on my

neck and covers my skin with a web of fire and ice. When Lou and I happen to touch, I feel like the air around us is filled with tiny lightning bolts that don't hurt. At night, I am often sleepless even though I urgently need to rest. When I do sleep, I dream of Lou's blue eyes and the many unspoken things I think I see in them. Promises that fly away like shy birds when I get too close. They haunt my nights, my days, and the shimmering shell that surrounds us like a soap bubble.

I'm just scared of what will happen if the bubble bursts.

Today, all Lou and I have to spend the night on is a narrow strip of sand. The edge of the forest has advanced almost to the lake, and in some places, the roots of the willows, birches, and poplars even reach into the water.

I examine the glowing red sky, where a layer of thick clouds is gathering in the north. Hopefully, it won't start to rain, otherwise, there will be high water and we'll have to move from the tiny bay into the dense forest. Something that would not be wise considering the population of wolves and rutting bull moose, especially not so close to the lake.

After Lou and I stretch the tarp, I stack half-rotted driftwood and build a makeshift fire for Lou to start Grey's milk.

When I disappear into the forest to collect birch branches, dusk already covers the water like a hazy veil. For a while, I busy myself with picking up suitable branches and tying them together when Grey jumps up at me. "Well, got enough to eat?" I greet him as he jumps up at me, yipping and wagging his tail happily.

I'm still concerned that the milk powder won't be enough and that we're not feeding him enough. He only gets three meals, but he's strong enough now to endure. Nevertheless, I am afraid he could soon catch his first prey and thereby awaken his hunting instinct. Maybe then he'll disappear into the woods and we'll never see him again.

Out of the blue, he jumps over a trunk lying on the ground and ignores me.

I go after him and discover a fresh fox carcass.

"Hey, don't!" I call to him. "It'll make you sick."

Grey lays his ears down, barking as if not realizing there's a special treat there.

"Forget it, little one!" I tuck the birch branches I've picked up under my arm and stomp through the undergrowth, heading back. As a branch cracks loudly under my feet, Grey rushes toward me like greased lightning.

"You're a little scaredy-cat, you know that?" I tease him affectionately, bending down to pat his head. "You're probably too scared to run off anyway…" A spruce branch scrapes my cheek as I bend over to look at the bay. Lou is no longer sitting around the campfire. My heart starts to race, but then I spot her near a few raspberry bushes growing on the edge of the forest.

"Dammit!" I curse under my breath, hefting the bulky bundle of wood. Did I seriously think she would try to run away again?

I shake my head at myself and pick my way through deadwood and bushes. I was so relaxed the entire time, but then Lou could hardly walk. She's still limping, but no longer as badly.

No, she wouldn't attempt it again, I reassure myself. There's something that's keeping her here. She doesn't say it with words, only with looks.

I've almost reached the edge of the forest when I hear a sound that doesn't belong in the wilderness. Definitely not in the part where I've been living for the past three years.

A vague feeling of anxiety rises in me. For a moment, I stand there petrified, listening. Wild geese scream in the air. A few aspen leaves shake above me, but that's not it. A gentle, steady splash floats downstream across the lake.

It's not the sound of swans taking off nor that of Canada geese or otters.

Before I even realize that it can only be poachers or tourists in rowboats, snatches of voices break through the twilight. Deep laughter glides across the water like swooping birds, followed by words I don't understand.

I drop the bundle of firewood on the ground and look toward the lake, but I can't see anything. The bay is concealed, and instead, I discover Lou. She's standing ankle-deep in the water next to the drooping branches of a willow tree, looking at a point that remains hidden from me.

An eerie silence settles over me, paralyzes my heart, my tongue, and my legs. She will scream! Only fractions of a second separate me from my nightmare. I'm going to lose her.

Lou, I want to yell, *don't do it!* but my throat is closed up and every sensation is numb. I can only stand at the edge of the forest and watch Lou wade further into the water. Soon, she'll disappear behind the willow and then I'm never going to see her again.

Fear and darkness well up in me. I feel like I'm falling. The little boy pulls me toward him, always deeper down.

No! I yell at him. *Not now! Not now or I'll lose her. You'll lose her! And you love her! I love her!*

The steel-hard, locked spot in my stomach begins to burn. A blazing, uncontrolled inferno. Something inside me reacts. I start to run. With a few leaps, I'm at the willow and take cover under the hanging branches like under a dome. Through the leaves, I see Lou and three canoes, manned by two men each, gliding down the river. Six! There are six of them. I've won every fight, but if Lou calls out now, I'll lose. The power marches every day have drained my strength.

The burning reaches my head, roaring through my senses like a wildfire, turning everything bloodred. I don't know how I manage to move silently. I feel everything in strangely disconnected sequences: the sand under my feet, then the water, the rising moisture of the lake.

Lou is standing right in front of me, separated only by the leafy curtain of willow branches. She doesn't notice anything.

Again, the throaty laughter echoes over to us. A few swans flutter up. The last canoe reaches the level of the willow.

I can't think straight anymore. It's like that time right before I drugged Lou. This miserable feeling of losing something important if I keep going. Her shy smile. Her gained trust. However, I can't stop

this red burning and the chaos in my head. It consumes everything. Before I can stop myself, I slide through the branches and, from behind her, cover her mouth with my hand. With a hard, merciless jerk, I pull her behind the branches of the willow.

CHAPTER 28

"Not a sound!" I hiss in her ear, but it's all wrong. I shouldn't hold her like this, with my arm wrapped around her waist like a damn rope, but I can't help it.

Resigning to her fate, she collapses in my grip, and through the silence, I only hear the paddles diving into the water in a nerve-wracking rhythm. In, out, in, out. Foreign words bounce over the waves. Dark laughter, like mockery. Still, my mind is filled with red fire. Roars, screams, burns. I just can't let go of Lou, can't loosen my arms. They're stuck like the latch inside me.

The canoes slide on, away from us. Away from Lou.

Suddenly she fights back as if only now realizing that her chance is rowing away. With all her strength, she throws herself against my embrace. Her bare feet splash in the water as if they were oars that could take her away from me. Water sprays around us.

Another laugh in the night. Then, abrupt silence, a pause.

"Hush!" I pull her closer to me and press my fingers even harder over her mouth. The sound of swan wings floats across the lake.

Lou whines behind my hand. Her resistance weakens as if I sedated her a second time. It scares me even though I can feel she's still breathing. She will hate me again. With every passing second, I grow more aware of what I'm actually doing to her. I'm hurting her. I hold her like a perpetrator grabs a victim, not like someone who

cares about her. Not like someone who has already shared so much with her. Everything is wrong.

Fear and self-loathing choke me. The red fire flows from my head into my eyes. It glows like lava gutting my sockets. There's a scream inside me that can't get out.

Laughter rings out again softly, almost an inkling, and louder shouts follow, a jumble of voices, and then all is quiet.

Too quiet.

I still can't let go of Lou. I hold her, cling to her like I don't believe she's still there. I don't know how much time passes. She could be gone now, with the strangers. Happy and saved.

The thought numbs me. My arms and legs buckle and I let go of Lou, more gently than I thought I could.

For a moment, she stands there, motionless. Her breathing is ragged and the sweater sticks to her back like a second skin.

Lou, I want to whisper. *Forgive me. I'm sorry. Forgive me*.

But she runs away from me step by step as if I had beaten her and kicked her while she was on the ground. Nothing is the same anymore, I can feel it in the way she moves.

Lou…

When she has almost reached the trunk of the willow, she turns to me abruptly. As I look at her, I clench my hands and only now realize how much my fingers are shaking. She seems even smaller than usual, even more fragile, even more worthy of protection. Her face is flushed and covered in frantic red spots. Incomprehension, anger, and hurt pride shimmer in the mirror of her eyes.

"You didn't have to do that." Her voice trembles, but it's not fear.

"Yes, unfortunately I did," I whisper, feeling like I'm the prisoner of both of us.

"No!" She yells so hard I jump. "I wouldn't have screamed." She shakes her head wildly. "If I had wanted to, I would have done it. Long before you grabbed me so tight like I was merely the prey you obsess over."

I don't understand anything anymore. Her words don't make any sense. "You wouldn't have screamed?" I repeat, stunned. "I don't understand…why… I mean, that was your chance…wasn't it…" A

deep fear takes hold of me, I don't know why. The rest of the red raging in me dies down. "Lou," I beg, helpless from incomprehension. "Why not?"

She looks at me with half-open lips. *You know why!* she seems about to scream, but an invisible force holds back her words. The moment I see her standing there, fragile and strong, I realize what it truly means.

She would have sacrificed everything for me. Her freedom, her past, herself. Because if she can't go back, she'll never be the Lou she used to be. She betrayed her brothers for me. Her friends, everything that makes her special. It is too much.

A raw pain surges from the bottom of my soul to the surface. When she wanted to prove to me what I mean to her, I mistrusted her. I have no reason not to believe that she had time to scream.

I shake my head with tears in my eyes. "I've done everything wrong again…" I slowly take a step toward her. "When I heard them…I thought they were going to take you away from me. There were six of them." I slap my hands over my face, a cheap shield to hide the chaos inside me. "I thought that was it, that I'd lost you forever…" My body trembles, but I don't care. For the first time, weakness doesn't matter. The world has turned upside down and in front of me is the girl I love, who didn't leave me when she had the chance. "Why didn't you scream… I don't understand you… Lou, why not?" I can't stop repeating it. I comprehend nothing and yet everything. My fear is so great; the fear of hurting Lou, the fear that this sacrifice will go too deep. I just don't deserve it—yet I really want it.

I breathe in shakily and hear a landing formation of swans and the gentle ripple of the water.

"You want to know why I didn't scream?" I suddenly hear Lou ask directly in front of me. The challenge in her voice is as brittle as glass, like everything that binds us.

I can only nod and lower my hands. She stands a few steps in front of me. My gaze strays over her face and the tiny details seem oversized and intense. The silky lashes, the delicate cinnamon-colored freckles, the pale cheeks. However, it is the look in her eyes

that almost brings me to my knees. A vulnerability shimmers in it that seems even greater than the sacrifice she made. It's a silent, desperate plea not to hurt her. A plea to the part of me that loves her with that tenderness so foreign to me.

Come to me, Lou, I whisper in my mind. *Come here*.

As if hearing me, she takes the last step toward me, wraps her arms around my neck, and rests her head on my chest.

The gentleness of the touch has me frozen with fear like at the beginning of our journey. I can feel Lou everywhere, but my hands are paralyzed and won't obey me. I want to hold and protect Lou; from the Brendan I fear so much myself, who knows no closeness and no love. Who always destroys everything and says the wrong words. However, Lou believes in the other part of me, unconditionally and much more than I do. She believes in the Brendan who drank the drug and who might be a good person.

I can! I mentally scream, awkwardly wrapping my arms around her waist. Then, I just hold her. Just hold her tight.

The feeling of falling shudders through me like I've jumped off a bridge, when Lou pulls my head down right into her hair. The smell of pine needles, river water, and smoke fills me. This is so real. So real. There's nothing left but her and me, our tightly entwined bodies and trembling heartbeats. Being embraced in Lou's arms makes me feel complete. As if I had been wandering aimlessly since birth. Blind, deaf, and dumb, and as if within her were the images, melodies, and words that were stolen from me.

The fabric of my hoodie gets wet and I realize she's crying. Probably has been the entire time.

"Do you know now?" she then asks through a soft sob.

I can't speak, not even nod. This love hurts. She's breaking everything in me. Instead of answering, I pull Lou even closer and suddenly her hands are on my cheeks. They are soft and hot. The softness is driving me insane.

I don't know if Lou inched even closer to me or if I leaned down closer to her. I can only feel her silky soft skin under my lips. Her smooth forehead, her delicate eyelids, the cool tip of her nose. Her mouth.

My heart is pounding in my chest. I kiss her as gently as I can and she opens her lips for me. Her warm tongue presses against mine, timid and shy, almost questioning. *Am I allowed to do this? Will you ever hurt me again?* Hot, cold shivers run down my spine. I think I'm going insane with happiness. She tastes so good. Like salt, like raspberries and peppermint. All I can think about is how much I want her. All of her. The whole Lou.

When her knees buckle, I pick her up, and she wraps her legs around my waist without breaking the kiss. She presses against me, tight, everywhere, digs her hands in my hair. Oh, God, my body aches with desire. A breathless tremor runs through me. I feel trapped by intoxication.

At some point, we pull apart, gasping for air at the same time. We gaze into each other's eyes and I find something in her expression that I know I'll never forget. Something deep, sparkling, enigmatic, something like shadow luck or dazzling night. Something contradictory yet at the same time, immensely strong. It awakens such a longing in me that I think my heart might burst into two if I don't feel Lou right away.

We kiss again and I carry her to the shore. Everything flies by me, seemingly surreal. The screams of the wild geese, the golden leaves, the smell of the river, and the humidity. I carefully place her on the narrow strip of sand covered by the hanging branches of the willow and lower my body onto hers, covering it completely. I rest my hands on the sand on either side of her head and look at her from above. Her eyes flicker, confused but happy. She smiles and it encompasses so much, everything really. Everything I've always wanted. This can't be reality. It can't possibly be real. Things like this don't happen to me. I must be making an odd expression because Lou digs her fingers into my hair tightly again and pulls me toward her until my lips hover over hers. I feel her rapid breath against my mouth. I suppress the throaty sound rising in me. My longing for her is killing me. My desire is killing me.

I find the hem of her sweater with my fingertips, slide my hand under, and feel her warm skin, her smooth stomach, and the tender

curve of her breasts. I gently enclose them in my fingers; so sweet, so soft. Just like I always imagined.

At that moment, I wake up as if I was in a dream. This is going too fast. Not for me, but for Lou. But I don't want to stop. I want to keep tasting, feeling, and smelling her. But then I think how easily I can ruin everything.

"Maybe…maybe we should wait…" I whisper hesitantly, looking at her again: the oval face, the flushed lips, and the eyes blazing with heat, which have never been more unfathomable than they are now. "Maybe after what happened, you're too confused to know what you want." It's hard for me to say since everything inside me is burning hot and cold. I try to hide it for Lou's sake, but I have a feeling I can't.

She doesn't answer right away, but pulls me down a bit. The tip of my nose touches hers. "No," she whispers. "No…I'm not confused. I'm simply sad because I can't have it all."

She means her brothers, her home. I back away automatically, but she pulls me down by the shoulders and begins kissing me again in her shy, innocent way. *Am I allowed to do this? Will you ever hurt me again?*

Dammit! *Stop it, Lou! If you're not certain, you should stop!*

But she doesn't. She sucks on my tongue, circling it with hers, sweet and promising. My abdomen starts to tingle. My mind is flying away.

Suddenly, the desire in me becomes as big and unstoppable as a fire in a dry summer forest. I rip my sweater off my body and pull Lou's over her head. Pale and silvery, her body shimmers in the darkness. Her breasts are milky white, small and firm, the nipples bright as rosebuds. I trace the contours with my fingertips and kiss the goose bumps that form underneath. My stroking fingers and lips move upwards again and again and I kiss Lou. I taste her wet tongue as I take off my pants and then hers. We aren't wearing anything underneath and I feel her everywhere.

My thinking, senses, and desire merge. Burn as if they were already a memory. There's the patter of rain, cold drops on my back, and Lou's hands timidly sliding over my body. Over my shoulder

blades, down to my butt, to the back of my thighs, and back up into my hair. My lips and fingers explore Lou everywhere; warm, damp velvety areas. She trembles beneath me at my touch. Her lips in the hollow between my neck and shoulder. Her hands shyly feel their way down. Everything blurs and rushes past me. Kisses again. This time stormy and erratic. A shiver runs through me. My body tenses, I want all of her and as if Lou can feel that need, she opens her legs for me.

I enter her carefully. Her breath bursts in tiny gasps against my skin and her eyes flicker, a mixture of fear and desire. Suddenly, she gasps and I stop, startled.

"Lou? Everything okay? Does it hurt?" My words seem strange to the situation, but she nods.

"It's okay," she whispers back, breathless, and her fingers, which clawed at my hair, let go. "It's almost over."

I wait anyway and only continue when her eyes are open and round again. When I'm completely inside her, feeling her so intensely, I know I can never let her go. It's only now that I realize how much I've longed for her. My body trembles with excitement, ecstasy, and happiness.

As if through a fog, I notice Lou slipping her arms under my armpits, holding on to me. Her sweaty fingers cling to my damp back. I hold back, move slowly and carefully. A soft gasp escapes her mouth. So untainted and full of wonder. It drives me mad, insane, makes my heart race. This is incredibly different from what I did in dimly lit basements. That was dirty, restless, filled with dark lust. This is beyond anything I've experienced. There is a beautiful pain somewhere deep inside me, like all my wounds bleed and heal simultaneously.

And I want a lot more of her amazement, her desire. I roll onto my back so Lou is on top of me.

"Now you," I whisper with a smile.

Lou puts her hands on the sand next to my head, her cheeks are flushed, her eyes bright with fever. Her body presses against mine. She looks at me inquisitively and I think I understand her.

With a soothing gesture, I stroke her damp sandy hair. "Don't worry, it will flow on its own," I say quietly to take away her shyness.

I put my hands on her shoulders, straighten her up, and gently press my abdomen against hers. Lou doesn't need more prompting. Slowly, she lifts her hips and then sinks down in a concentrated and deliberate manner. She peers at me, unsure if she's doing it right. I nod slightly. Heavens, it's killing me. Lou, her insecurity and constraint are driving me insane. My body is on fire. I see Lou as if through a bright, misty flicker. The blonde tousled hair, the shiny red lips, her thighs straddling me, the endless astonishment in her eyes.

My heart is beating hard and rough in my chest. It's searching for the rhythm in a place only she knows. It's like the heartbeat of the earth, a dark, slow beat. Deep inside, I feel it vibrate and swell. Faster. Hunting. The images of the moment race past me. Lou's sweaty skin, her pale breasts that glow in the dark and bob up and down.

The heat inside me becomes an unquenchable burn. When I think I can't take it anymore, I grab Lou's hips. A surprised sound comes out of her mouth. It drives me crazy with lust and longing. I have the feeling of overflowing. I dig my fingers into her ass hard, wanting to hold her down so she stops, but it's impossible. Her breath catches. My pelvis bumps against hers over and over. Harder, deeper. Eventually, her back arches and she throws her head back. A dark sound escapes my throat. Everything in me pulses. A shiver of excitement floods her body and ends in mine. Her sweet, stormy gasps fill the night, a sigh of relief and a whimper. It fills me and something inside explodes. The burning shoots out of me. I hear myself scream as I'm carried away momentarily on a wave. To Lou, to us. To what is happening to us.

Seconds later, Lou descends on me with a strangled breath. Her body is soaked with sweat and her hair tickles my chin. I silently wrap my arms around her and hold her tight. Against my chest, I feel the pounding of her heart, a wild, stormy drumming. Da-da-dam-da-da-dam-da-da-dam. I stroke her damp back soothingly, and in response, she wraps her arm even tighter around my neck.

This is forever. It just has to be.

For the second time, I feel like I died and rose again. The echo of our love connects me to a place deep inside me, yet I feel infinitely far away.

I have to think about how everything can change forever in the span of a few moments. Maybe Lou is right. Maybe someday I can become a better person. With a sigh, I pull her even closer to me, feeling her soft body, her heart slowing, and her wonderful exhaustion.

I don't know how to breathe and live without her.

I close my eyes. I don't want to think about it, not after what just happened. I simply want to lie here and feel like the past has no power over me. As if Thorson Ave, my stepfather, the beatings, and the darkness never existed. Like I'm a normal boy and Lou is just the girl I love and who I came to the lake with. With her so close to me, for the first time I manage to feel innocent as if I had no past at all and, inside me, it's like the little boy is reaching for my hand.

Later, Lou and I get up and walk back to the fire hand in hand. We silently fetch the bundle of firewood from the edge of the forest and add a few logs before we crawl into the warm sleeping bag together.

I can't stop looking at or touching Lou. My longing for her has only grown stronger now. I whisper to her how beautiful she is and silently add how much I love her. Everything about her. Just like before yet different. The Lou I love is no longer a fantasy. She gets scattered red spots when she's nervous. She doesn't like to eat rabbit and she's not just a bright light, she laughs and cries. She's funny at times, often sarcastic, and mostly brave. She gets to the bottom of things. And she has a big heart, not just for wolf pups. She is a fighter. Her stomach is ticklish below her navel. She likes to be kissed tenderly and stormily. She's barely responsive before her first coffee in the morning and she tugs at her hair when she's nervous.

I knew so much about her before and yet nothing.

I stroke her hair and we make love again, this time not so quickly and breathlessly, but carefully and slowly as if we have all the time

in the world.

When I wake up the next morning, I hold Lou in my arms like I did the night I warmed her. Her back nestles against me as her butt presses gently against my abdomen. For a moment, I'm tempted to pick up where we left off last night, but then I think of the twenty miles I have left to cover today. Besides, I don't want to scare Lou. As if reading my mind, she snuggles into me and I sigh and pull her closer.

"We have to go," I whisper hoarsely into her sleep-warm neck.

I hear her yawn and mumble something that sounds like *lying down*.

There's nothing I would rather do. To motivate myself, I slide away from her and focus on the area. In the pale light of dawn, the first chirping can be heard from the thicket. A high-pitched whistling concert alongside the splashing of individual drops that fall to the ground after the long rain. Only now do I realize how odd I feel. Strangely speechless at what happened. And I don't know how to deal with Lou. What does she expect from me? Does she expect anything at all?

As we crawl out of the sleeping bag and dress, I sneak a peek at her. There is a faint smile on her sleep-reddened face.

Is she happy? She can't truly be happy with me, can she?

We roll up the sleeping bag together and when I go to pick a few berries, she comes along as if it was natural. Later, we take turns stirring Grey's milk. We hardly talk. Maybe I'm not the only one afraid of the words. There are so many things I need to say to Lou: I love her and I can't accept her sacrifice. That I'll take her back to her brothers. But none of that comes out of my mouth. Saying it makes it true because to do otherwise would be cruel. I can't raise her hopes if I can't fulfill it.

That's the point. I don't know what I'm willing to give. Maybe Lou and I have a chance here in the Yukon. Maybe Lou's sacrifice is our future and we'll be happy in the wild.

As we spoon oatmeal from a bowl, we hold hands without looking at each other. Later, much later—we've been underway for a while and I feel her warmth on my back—confused images spin through my head. Spinning around, we let ourselves go and sing with outstretched arms around the campfire at the RV. The next moment, we walk hand in hand gravely and silently across the frozen Quiet Lake. Then, we make love in the cabin's bunk. Finally, I see Lou running across the dry grass to her brothers.

For the first time, I'm seriously thinking about what it would be like to let Lou go. What it would really mean to me. Can I live with that decision? The answer is *no*. Nothing makes sense without her. Not even the Yukon makes sense. Without her, my life would be worthless, a lifetime of dying.

Eventually, I snap out of my thoughts because Lou's teeth are chattering. I stop abruptly.

"You're shaking," I say in surprise and glance over my shoulder. "Are you cold?"

"A b-bit." Lou rests her cheek against my head and I can feel the heat radiating from her through my hair. Something is wrong with her.

I gently slide her off my back and manage to grab her under the shoulder before she falls over. She looks at me with glassy eyes, reminding me of the twin girls from the slums who died of pneumonia one particularly wet winter.

With a bad feeling, I put my hand on her forehead. She's hot as a coal stove.

"You're hot. You have a fever." Damn it, that's the last thing we need.

"N-now what?" Teeth chattering, she's holding on to my arm, seemingly exhausted.

I lead her to a tree stump at the edge of the forest and gently push her down. I hope she doesn't get the flu. Back at the RV it wouldn't be a problem, but out here, she's exposed to the cold and harshness of the wilderness without a place to recuperate. I quickly put my down jacket on her, nervously unlace the backpack, and take out the thermos with the raspberry leaf tea.

I silently hand her the mug and watch her anxiously as she sips the tea.

She is pale, only her cheeks are glowing like two red baked apples.

"Are you feeling warmer now?" I ask after a while.

She gives a weak nod.

"You're still shaking," I say, raising my eyebrows a little sternly because she's trying to pretend.

Lou puts her hands on her cheeks and looks up at me trustingly wide-eyed. "It doesn't matter," she mumbles. "Your back warms me when you carry me."

She looks so cute it makes my heart ache. "I don't have anything with me to bring down the fever," I tell her, eyeing her doubtfully. "Do you think you can hold on a little longer?"

"Sure." She tries a smile that's pathetic enough to touch me.

As I pick her up, I think I can feel her heart pounding against my back. I've barely started walking when she leans her cheek against my head.

"You think we'll last forever?" she whispers into my hair.

I stop abruptly. Her heart is really pounding. "Of course," I say, even though I don't know anything and am just as confused as she is. "Why do you ask?"

"No idea. I'm just scared…"

"Scared of what?"

"Of everything… Of us, the future… Of what will be…"

Perhaps it is precisely this fear that is actually making her ill and not hypothermia. Who knows what she's imagining. Maybe she believes she'll be my prisoner again once we're back at the RV. Is she no longer a prisoner? I close my eyes briefly and take a deep breath. What are we to each other now if we are no longer kidnapper and victim? I can't find an answer. I never want to hurt her again, that's the only certainty in me.

"Lou…" I say softly, as gently as I can. "I love you. There's nothing to be afraid of… I thought you knew that."

"Okay," she whispers through chattering teeth.

"Really okay?"

"Yes."

I doubt her words, but she's too sick to talk about it, so I keep walking, pointing across the lake, sparkling in the midday sun. "There's a spot up ahead where we can wade through the water to the other side. It's where the lake turns into a river again."

"Bren?"

"Lou?"

"If we're together, forever, then we can have a normal life, can't we?" She wraps her arms tightly around my neck and leans against my back.

As if struck by lightning, I stop again and feel myself tense up.

"I can't live a normal life, Louisa," I say, harder than I want to. It's almost like old Brendan is bursting out of me like an eggshell.

"But…"

"No but. You know what happens to me during a flashback, don't you?" I try with all my might to push back the Brendan who is so uncompromising. I don't want him to ruin everything again. Nevertheless, he is right.

Lou still holds me, undeterred by my harshness—or at least she doesn't show it. "But I'm not leaving you," she says so lovingly that my insides tighten. "That means we can go somewhere together."

"No," I say unkindly. "I get blackouts when I'm around a lot of people. Did I tell you about the man I knocked unconscious during a flashback?"

"Yes. At the very beginning, after the thunderstorm."

"He didn't press charges only because I paid him more for his suffering than he probably would have gotten in court. There are too many triggers in everyday life that provoke such seizures."

"You lived in the slums. Were there no triggers?"

I snort bitterly. "The entire slums are one big trigger, but that doesn't matter now. If I'd had flashbacks there, no one would have even noticed."

She is silent. She's probably trying to figure out how to convince me. Maybe she truly thinks we can live together among other people. In a cozy small town with stuffy neighbors and the supermarket around the corner. But how could that possibly work?

Inevitably, when I freak out for the first time, it would all be over. And Lou would leave me one day when she realizes how hopeless I am. No, I can never go back. I belong in the woods with Lou.

I think she had dropped it when she asks, "Your flashbacks didn't start immediately after…" She falters. "…after whatever?"

"No."

"How long have you had them?"

I sigh loudly. "They started when I was fighting for money. So years later. I thought I had overcome everything until then. Could live without thinking about it all the time." I laugh cynically. "Sometimes, one word was enough. Or a blinding light. Shopping centers were really bad—because of so many stimuli. A certain perfume, the way someone walked, or talked…" Like months ago at Trader Joe's in Los Angeles.

"I can go shopping," Lou murmurs. I almost smile at her optimism, but only almost.

"Bren?" she whispers again.

"Lou?" I reply.

"Do you think they might get better someday?"

I sigh again. "Perhaps. One day."

"Bren?"

"What now?" I grumble, impatient and tense.

She presses her cheek into my hair. "I love you too."

The world around me begins to sway and suddenly my eyes are wet. I swallow hard, wondering why I'm so sad right now.

I release Lou's leg, only holding her on one side and pull her head close to mine.

"Oh, God, Lou…" I can barely speak. "You continue to surprise me… I want to make you as happy as you deserve."

"Bren?"

"Yes?" My throat is scratchy. I don't want to cry, not now.

"Maybe we should talk less and hold on to each other more?"

"Maybe you should stop talking and get well first," I say firmly, covering up my weakness. I grab her thigh and pull her back up properly.

"Good idea," Lou mumbles sleepily, and I start moving again.

No, I’m sprinting. Nobody has ever told me they love me. And now it’s a shock. Maybe not. It seems unnatural and sick to me. You can’t love someone like me. All the people who should have—who had to!—left me. Lou, however, fell in love with me. She loves me. Doesn’t she? I would love to believe it and cling to those words. But maybe that's exactly what happened, which is why I kidnapped her in the first place. Because that's what I wanted.

Now, however, I wish I had the reassurance that her love is real. But I will never, ever know. And that seems almost worse to me than if she continued to despise me. Because that I could believe. That would make sense.

Over the next few days, Lou is getting worse and nothing helps bring down the fever. Neither the leg compresses nor the peppermint tea baths or the Emergen-C bring about any improvement. After a short time, I realize that I have to double my daily distance. I clench my teeth and walk in total silence to conserve my strength, but I don’t know how much longer my body can withstand the strain.

Soon, the nights are freezing cold and we have to sleep close to the fire to get enough warmth. I barely close my eyes, so I can hold Lou in my arms, but I don’t know if she notices. Sometimes, she wakes up in the middle of the night and mutters unintelligible things with feverish eyes. Each time, I stroke her hair soothingly, kiss her temples and cheeks, and tell her how much I love her and that this love is forever; that she fills my darkness with light. I tell her that what she makes me feel scares me. This wonderful feeling of freedom, sky, stars, and the size of her heart. It clouds my head like I’ve inhaled too much oxygen and has me reeling in reality as if it were a dream. I tell her I’m afraid my love might overwhelm and devour her like a spirited creature, but I’d take good care of her. But I never tell her I’d let her go. And yet my heart grows heavier every day.

CHAPTER 29

The night we arrive at the RV, I prepare Lou's antibiotic. I even manage to give it to her without too much going wrong. It painfully reminds me of the beginning of the kidnapping, when I forced Lou to drink the water with the drugs in it. I reluctantly shake the thought off and settle her at the back of the bed, spreading the thick down comforter over her and whispering to her *everything will be fine again*.

Exhausted, I drop onto the bench because I know I can't sleep anyway. After zoning out for a while, I dig Lou's necklace out of the backpack. I haven't had time to take a closer look at it yet. The chain snapped right in the middle, a minor thing really. I quietly retrieve my tools, severing a bent open link and joining two intact ones. After that, I stow the necklace in a cupboard and decide not to give it back to Lou until she's better.

For the next few days, I spoil Lou the best I can and give her medicine three times a day. On the second day, I manage to feed her a couple of spoonfuls of broth, and on the third, she eats a whole bowl of vegetable soup. The fever goes down and the heavy cough I feared doesn't come. Soon, she can even eat her favorite food again and giggle at my bad jokes.

However, every time I look at Lou, I feel more lost.

That night, I can't sleep again and I watch her from the foot of the bed like I used to. She sleeps on her back, her hair around her head like a light wreath. Her mouth is slightly open and her cheeks have a delicate rose tone. One arm is bent and relaxed next to her head, fingers slightly open. Her posture is reminiscent of a child. So absolutely trusting, not as tense as weeks ago. I remember the night under the willow tree when she was on top of me, eyes full of wonder and silvery breasts.

My fingers twitch. I want to touch her, but I'm afraid I'll wake her.

Oh, Lou…

As I look at her, the reason for my sadness becomes more and more evident to me. I love Lou. I love her too much, too strongly, too greatly. I love her more every day and wish for nothing else than her happiness.

But her happiness isn't me. Not if I don't know if her love is real or just an illusion. Even if it were real, I would have to let her go. For her own good. She needs to get back to her life, her brothers, people who know her and have loved her since she was born. I could never give her the love she needs and deserves, I'm too damaged for that.

You have to let her go, Bren…

I know.

Old Brendan is silent to my inner monologue, but I can feel his fear beneath the surface. Cold and clammy, it climbs up my throat and numbs my senses.

I cannot do that!

Yes. You can do it. For her. For Lou. She deserves it. She deserves the best Brendan you can be. Because of her you found him in the first place!

I put my head in my hands and try to breathe away the fear, but it doesn't work. Panic grows inside me, dark and icy. My heart is pounding in my chest and a river of blackness floods my senses. I'll be alone again and it will feel as empty and hollow as before, maybe even worse.

It's not Lou's fault. It's not her fault.

I know.

I cannot do that!

Terror grips me, tearing my insides apart with cold hands. My two sides battle each other mercilessly. My eyes water, but I don't allow the pain to spread. It is too much, too many years are accumulated there. If I let it, I'll go insane. I drop my hands and push back the sorrow, so much so my stomach hurts like it has seeped into it. With one last look at Lou, I turn and walk out into the night.

The sky is overcast, not even the moon can be seen. I force myself to take a few deep breaths and calm the old part of me, but the fear won't leave me.

"I won't make it," I whisper to myself.

You still have to do it, even if you don't make it!

I know.

CHAPTER 30

I walk through the next day as if in a thick fog. Over and over, my thoughts wander to Lou and what I should do. When I cook her favorite dish in the evening, I hardly eat anything and feed Grey some noodles instead, lost in thought. Lou gives me a strange look while coiling spaghetti on her fork, but doesn't say anything.

Trying to pull myself together so she doesn't get scared again of me and my moods, I eat a few bites.

Still, I'm relieved when I can turn my back to her while doing the dishes. Looking at her means seeing all that I will lose if I give in to my inner voice. Besides, I feel like even though I'm trying not to show it, she's realizing how messed up I am. And I don't want to tell her anything about it yet, because I may change my mind.

I scrub the dishes monotonously with the brush and run the water afterward.

"Are you sick?" Lou suddenly asks.

It is obvious, she already knows me too well!

I set a plate on the drying towel, forcing a smile on my face before turning to face her. "No, why do you ask?" My tone isn't quite as carefree as I would have liked.

"You're so pale. Maybe you caught it." Lou gives me a searching look.

I wipe my hands dry on my pants and sit down on the bench across from her. "I don't think what you have is contagious," I say

seriously. I grab her fingers across the table.

"Why not?" Lou frowns. She is wrapped in her down comforter, looking like a small soft package. And while she seems happy overall, she can't possibly be.

I cling to her hands, and for a few seconds, I can't answer. "I can't give you what you really need," I finally explain. "There's no medicine for that… I think you got sick because you're unhappy. Your immune system's weakened, then there's the escape, and the cold…" I stand up abruptly, remembering the necklace. With a soft tinkle, I pull it out of the cupboard. Lou's eyes grow as big as saucers.

"I found it on the hillside." Suddenly, I'm afraid of her reaction. Maybe this chain will make her sad, too. "It was hanging from one of the rocks. The chain broke…so, I…well, I didn't want to give it back to you until I fixed it." I hold out the chain and Lou grabs it, hands shaking. "It seemed important to you…you never took it off."

Lou swallows a few times in a row and then shakes her head briefly. "Oh, Bren…thank you…"

We look at each other and Lou's eyes still have that deep, dark sparkle that makes me long for so much more.

I expected her to put the necklace on immediately, but she puts it on the table for me to look at, and delicately runs her forefinger over some of the charms: a silver cross, a red heart, a hand that looks a bit like a bell, and a turquoise disc with silver trim. Maybe she's trying to make it clear to me that she wants to share her memories with me—just as you would in a normal relationship.

I sit back down with a bitter taste in my mouth. I have no right to this past, quite the opposite.

"These four are from your brothers," I state instead of formulating it as a question. I'm sure because she doesn't pay attention to any of the others.

She nods and suddenly looks as lost as I currently feel.

"Do you want to tell me about them?" I smile, but it feels wrong. And even if I don't feel like I deserve her words, I have to let her speak.

As a tear rolls down her face, I catch it, and caress her cheeks.

Lou smiles bravely, grabs the chain, and puts it around her neck. It is as if a sigh of relief goes through her body and then she begins to talk, hesitantly at first, but after a while, her voice becomes more firm. I listen spellbound as she speaks lovingly of her brothers.

About Ethan, who rules the family like an imperious king, but who also tirelessly watches over everyone. About Avery, the passionate cook who acts as a mediator between siblings, and Liam, the outsider whom she particularly loves, maybe because of that. When she talks about Jayden, her voice cracks. She clutches the turquoise disc on the chain, and for a moment, I have to think about Delsin and Istu. She says Jayden is the dreamer in the Scrivers' family and that his stories reflect his heart.

"I had everything I needed as a child." She cries and I wipe the tears from her face. "A house full of love… A brother to take care of me… One to spoil me, one to invent the greatest games for me, and one to annoy… I felt loved, I didn't care how much or little we had. I never wanted to leave Ash Springs, our house and our yard where Liam made me catch invisible rhinos… It was paradise even though I didn't really realize it at the time." Small, soft sobs pepper her words. I awkwardly stroke her hand that still clutches the pendants of the necklace, and slowly she calms down.

My heart grows so heavy it feels like it's about to fall out of my chest. She should still be there. She belongs in Nevada, not the Yukon. She's not mine and I need to put an end to this.

There is a moment of silence as we look at each other. Lou's blue eyes are so painfully familiar to me yet, at the same time, completely alien in their depths. How is it possible that you know someone and, at the same time, don't? Why is it that Lou's mere presence makes my heart overflow with joy and, at the same time, provokes such great fear?

You know exactly why.

I look away and stare at the darkness outside the window.

"You're acting weird today," Lou whispers. "What's wrong?" Her voice is still hoarse from crying.

"I'm not sure." I blink at her.

She has to go home.

As if for a farewell, I take her head in my hands and kiss her gently on the forehead.

You have to let her go, the voice inside me whispers persistently. I wish I could just shut it up, but that's no longer possible. Lou brought out the new Brendan, who's now championing her. This is crazy.

I gently withdraw my hands and step outside as if I could run from myself.

In front of the RV, I take a deep breath. It wasn't fair to leave Lou without an explanation, but I'm not ready to tell her what's truly on my mind yet. I add a few logs and sit by the campfire. I stare into the flames, lost in thought.

I can't stop thinking about what I just said to Lou. She must have gotten sick with grief. Perhaps she is not aware of what she has given up with her decision. I can't explain it any other way, even if she claims otherwise. How could she make decisions now for what might be in five years? Even if she fell in love with me, it can't last forever. I also just heard her speaking about her home and her brothers and I'm sure she could never talk that way about me. Because there is nothing good to say about me.

I glance over my shoulder at the window and see Lou working at the sink. Her hair falls around her pale pink cheeks and she seems completely engrossed in washing the dishes.

My heart tightens just thinking of her not being here any longer. The dark, cold fear rises in my throat again and I instinctively reach for the silver coin on my bracelet.

I always end up alone. I can't do it. Not again.

I breathe in and out shallowly, concentrating on pushing the fear away. At that moment, I hear the RV door open.

Lou limps over to the fire, wrapped in the down comforter, and sits on my lap like it's the most natural thing in the world. I can almost physically feel her confusion by my behavior, so without a word, I wrap my arms around her as cautiously as I did at the lake a

few days ago. She nestles against my chest and her hair tickles my lips. Warmth flows into my stomach.

Holding her silences everything in me. The many questions and answers that are burned into my brain stop spinning. I calm down. I tell myself the decision to let her go doesn't have to be made today or tomorrow. I have time. If not today, then tomorrow or the day after that. This can go on forever until that one day where I can bring myself to make the decision. Or perhaps can't.

After a few minutes, Lou sits up on my lap. "Is the pendant on your bracelet also a memento?" she suddenly asks, nodding her chin in the direction of the leather strap.

The question surprises me, but maybe it is because we talked about her necklace earlier. However, I don't feel the need to reveal my past to her. I don't even want to recall it myself. "It was my mother's." My voice is muffled and I clear my throat.

Lou looks at me openly. "Do you want to talk about her?"

"No," I reply too sharply. Lou flinches. I'm immediately sorry for my harsh tone, but I don't want to say anything about her. I'm not ready for that. Lou has to accept this.

"You said she abandoned you," she continues.

I'm speechless for a moment.

Lou carefully places her hand on my arm. "Yet you keep this coin and have the symbol tattooed on your back."

Blood drains from my cheeks. How does she know this about my mom? I never spoke to her about it, ever. For a moment, a sequence of images flashes in my mind. A blonde woman, a little older than Lou, who runs after a little boy to catch him. The exuberant laughter echoes in me and pain from old longing squeezes my heart. A sound of agony rises in my throat and I can't hold it back. Out of reflex, I put my hands in front of my face and try to hide the deep horror inside me. "Please don't, Lou."

"Bren, look at me!" Lou takes my fingers and pulls them aside.

The image blurs before my eyes. I no longer see her but all the things I have locked inside me. Endless darkness, sorrow, and pain. Rose tendrils on ebony.

"I want to help you," I hear Lou say urgently. "Eventually, you'll have to talk about it. You'll need to."

My stomach convulses. "I don't have to do anything!" That is old Brendan speaking for me and it's useless to fight him on this.

Lou shakes her head. "Otherwise, we'll never be able to live a normal life. I will always be afraid of you. Part of me will always fear the other Brendan, do you understand?"

I don't pay attention to her because I can't get her earlier words out of my mind. "I never told you about my mother," I say uneasily, my heart beating too fast. "How do you know that I think she abandoned me?"

"You talk about the past during your flashbacks. You take on different roles."

It feels like she pushed me into ice-cold water.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you?"

"No." I stare numbly into the darkness of the trees. My ears start buzzing. A terrible suspicion arises in me.

Lou doesn't notice anything and wraps her arms around my neck like nothing happened. "I'm sure I know more about you than you realize. You once said you couldn't talk about that time, but that's what you do when you're stuck in your memories."

My racing heart wants to stop beating. Her words whip like a whirlwind through my mind. She knows everything! She knows my fear, my weakness, and my powerlessness. She knows what I am. A loser, a coward, a nothing. And she never let on.

Watch out!

Anger and shame boil up in me. I feel naked, exposed to the core. Why was she silent? What exactly does she know? Was she trying to take advantage of these things or does she see me simply as a merciless creature that needs to be pitied? Bitter bile rises in me. I can hardly think straight. I notice she is stroking my hair.

"You need to talk about it," she says quietly. "Maybe then the flashbacks will stop."

I don't heed her words. "Is that why you did it?" I ask her somberly, feeling my good intentions slipping away like a school of slippery fish.

"Did what?" Lou moves away from me. She looks caught.

"Love me. Was it out of pity?" *That is why you didn't push that pitiful creature away?* Suddenly, I feel disgusted with myself. Without realizing what I'm doing, I jump up and Lou slides off my lap, but quickly catches herself.

She shakes her head and lets out a strange laugh. "What makes you…"

"Was it out of pity, yes or no?" My tone is as cold as the icy fear in my soul. It freezes all the tears in me.

Lou looks terrified. Her eyes shimmer on her pale face. "No! No, of course not…" The words come out haltingly. She shakes her head defensively. "You think I didn't call out to the men because I felt sorry for the man who kidnapped me? Do you really think that would be enough to make me give up my life…pity?" There is bewilderment in the last word.

I stand by the fire with my arms crossed. I almost want to believe her and the desperate tone in her voice when I remember how well she hid the truth of my flashes from me—and how skillfully she managed to escape. She stole my lighter and set off the alarm to distract me. She's cunning.

"Maybe you would have screamed after all? Who knows?" Bitterness darkens my words. Our time together at the river was probably all a lie! Suddenly, everything is wrong. Just everything. My expression is severe as I look at her.

She stares back. "Stop it," she whispers to me.

But I can't. My old self pushes everything else away. "Maybe I caught you just in time and you took advantage of the situation. Slept with me to make me believe you love me." *Is Lou that cunning? My Lou?*

"I didn't have to prove anything to you!" she hisses, anger in her voice. "I didn't have to prove anything to you because I truly love you! But if you keep talking like this, I'm probably going to regret it."

"Oh, yes, I have a lot of regrets too," I blurt out breathlessly. I can't believe I almost fell for her a second time. "How could I have believed for a second that you meant it? What did you want to achieve with this whole performance? Were you trying to appeal to

my conscience?" I narrow my eyes, not caring if she's scared or not. "That I can't keep you a prisoner if we're so close? That I have to set you free if I truly love you?"

Eerie wolf howls erupt from the forest. I take a step toward Lou, but she doesn't back down and stands still. Tears glisten in her eyes, but I won't fall for it.

"I… I can't believe you really think that of me," she stammers. "Do you really think I would have gone as far as sleeping with you… just to make you think I love you?"

I shrug, emphatically indifferent. "Maybe you thought you could heal me by pretending. In truth, it was never about me, it was always about your freedom."

"You have to…you have to really, really hate me to say something like that…" Lou whispers, reaching for the pendants for support. "I don't understand you. I just said I know more about you than you realize. You've already had a fit during a thunderstorm. During which you said more than you probably would have ever revealed to me. And yet I still hated you afterward. One has nothing to do with the other."

She approaches me with a wry smile. It looks so fake, like I beat it out of her. Tentatively, she grabs my shoulder, but it seems to me that her fingers are tearing deep wounds.

I shake her hand off with a jerk. "Stop it, Louisa!" I back away.

Lou looks like I slapped her. "Brendan…listen to me! This is crazy." She gasps for breath, shaky. "I didn't fall in love with you because your father kept you prisoner somewhere underground."

The directness of her statement is like a cold dagger to the heart. *So dark…* I gasp reflexively. Tightness constricts my throat as everything inside me convulses.

"Stop it right now!" I say in a stony voice. How dare she talk about that. A red mist races through my thoughts.

"Bren, I love you!" Lou takes a step toward me, wringing her hands. "And of course I'm terribly sorry about what happened to you. And yes, I would really like to be the one who heals you. Unfortunately, love is not enough for that."

Her words get stuck in the fog inside me. When she reaches out to touch me again, I back away.

With a despondent expression on her face, she drops her arm. "No love in the world can heal what happened to you…" she says softly. "I saw one of your pictures when you left the closet open that one time." She hesitates as if afraid of giving too much away. "I told you this before, but you had a fit and you probably don't remember. Let's go to a psychologist and start fresh…"

Something inside me is going crazy. Anger grips me like a beast. "You just want to drag me to a psychiatrist so you'll have a chance to escape!" I yell at her, feeling the bolt relentlessly snapping into place inside me. "You don't want me at all! You just want to run away."

"*That's not true!*" she yells back, her body shaking with anger. "I sacrificed everything for you! My whole life! But that doesn't seem to mean anything to you. You know what? I wish I had screamed by the river! I wish I had at least wanted to scream! I wish I was home and not with you!"

Pain breaks through the armor that surrounds my soul. It is so strong that the red fog clouds my vision. I knew it. She doesn't even want to be here. She merely pretended to love me to gain leverage over me. All she feels for me is pity and contempt.

You are nothing, just ashes and dust, you godless bastard! One cannot love you.

Acid rises into my mouth, my chest tightens. I breathe to clear my vision. *Never lose your center of gravity*. I allow the old anger to settle over my pain. It is cool and much easier to bear.

With a statuesque expression, I stare at Lou, who looks at me with a mixture of defiance, helplessness, and anger.

"I'm so glad I figured you out in time," I say coldly and calmly.

Lou appears so confused, like I left her alone in a strange wooded area. "What do you mean, *just in time*?" she asks, pursing her lips.

I suppress a mocking laugh. "I'm an idiot! I was thinking about letting you go." My voice cuts the words out of my flesh, knowing how badly it will hurt her. Maybe that's exactly what I want. "I've

been seriously considering it since we got back. No, actually, ever since you told me you love me." I touch my forehead and laugh at my own stupidity. "And here it was all a lie." For a moment, I stare into the fire. The wolves are silent. The forest is silent. Lou is silent.

You didn't expect that, did you?

An owl hoots in the distance, then I hear Lou sob and look over at her.

"You were going to let me go?" she whispers weakly. "You thought about it?" She takes a step toward me, tears in her eyes.

"It doesn't matter," I reply hard-heartedly. "I've changed my mind." It must be hard for her, but my heart feels like a lifeless block of rock.

Lou presses her fist to her mouth. It looks like she's trying with all her might to hold back the tears, but she can't. She's being shaken by crying fits and her shoulders tremble. A tiny little part of me wants to hug and comfort her, but the other is stronger. The other feels betrayed and left alone, and he wants to hurt as much as he was hurt. He takes pleasure in her pain as the man used to take pleasure in the boy's pain. I hate that part, I despise it, but I'll never get rid of it. It's inside of me like an incurable disease; it was insane to think I could become a different person. I narrow my eyes at Lou.

She takes it as a request because she stretches her arm out to me again. Weeping. "Bren…please…you can't think such things about me…"

I ignore her gesture. I don't want to be fooled again. "You should go in now," I say unperturbed. "You're not quite well yet." I firmly grab her outstretched arm. "Come on, come with me."

Gruffly, I push her in front of me, just wanting it to be over, and not see her anymore, at least not today. I drag her into the RV.

"Brendan, please, be reasonable…" Lou is still crying, but I ignore it. She can cry as much and as hard as she wants, I won't give in. As she trips over her blanket, I catch her and give her a shove so she falls onto the bed.

I know what I have to do. With a numb heart, I go to the front and mechanically retrieve the iron chain with the handcuffs from the closet.

Lou doesn't even look at me, and even if she did, she couldn't see because her eyes are still filled with tears.

"Give me your wrist," I instruct her.

Lou obeys without resisting and I snap the cuff into place.

Monster, whispers the voice in my head.

Wordlessly, I walk outside without turning back to her.

CHAPTER 31

For a while, I stand by the fire, breathless with anger, unable to think about anything but our argument. I can't believe what just happened, it's complete chaos. How could Lou have fooled me all this time?

Trembling, I clench my fists, open them again and bury my hands deep in my pockets. I can't get her tearstained eyes out of my mind. Or her words.

I didn't have to prove anything to you because I truly love you!

She sounded so sincere. But she's done that before, even when she tricked me. *Shit*, I don't even know what to think anymore! Why didn't she tell me about the blackouts? What exactly does she know? Does she know my stepfather treated me like a mangy dog? Dragged me around the house on my hands and knees by a chain and made me eat from a dog bowl on the floor whenever it amused him? With my hands tied behind my back? Does she know about the coffin in the basement, the humiliating punishments? What else does she know about my mom? More than me?

How can she know it and not say anything about it?

Because at some point she planned on using it against you.

But she said she loves me.

You think someone like her could love someone like you, shithead? Isn't that why you kidnapped her?

Bren, I love you. She said that.

Forget it, bastard. Nobody will ever love you.

Maybe you're just making it easy for yourself. Maybe you want to be mad at her so you don't feel guilty about keeping her here!

The lump in my throat feels like stone. Do I want to make it easy for myself? Is it that simple? Is it possible that Lou was telling the truth and just kept silent out of respect for me?

Never! She would never love someone like you!

I close my eyes and try to block out the evil voice inside me. Lou talked to me during the flashes and helped me come back. Even the first time during the thunderstorm. Maybe she reacted to what I said. I was so grateful to her then. And if she's telling the truth, she already knew quite a bit about my past at that time. So, nothing has changed.

As if through a fog, I see her tearstained face in front of me and hear her desperate sobs because I don't believe her. *Fuck!*

I put my hand over my mouth as if trying to stifle a groan. As usual, my fear and anger have ruined everything; my fear of having to let her go because it's the right thing to do, it's something a good person would do.

A dull pressure squeezes my heart. I've been acting like a raving lunatic. It was an act of cruelty to tell her I considered letting her go. Tonight, I still thought all I wanted was her happiness. Simply because I love her. And whatever she thought, planned, or wanted, if I truly love her, shouldn't matter. It must not play a role in this decision.

You have to let her go.

I swallow against the cold panic in my throat. This time I manage to keep the fear down enough to think it through to the end, down to the last detail. I wouldn't even care if Lou turned me in, though being without Lou would be punishment enough. In the wild or in a cell, it would be the same for me. Both feel pointless, but it's not about me.

I take a shallow breath.

I have to do it. As soon as possible, so I won't change my mind again. I can never let old Brendan get the upper hand again.

Abruptly, I turn from the fire and go straight back to the RV. I carefully open the door, climb the steps, and stand in the aisle. My eyes sting as I look toward the back. Lou is curled up on her side, her face chalk white and swollen from crying. What a huge idiot I was!

"Lou?" I ask softly.

Step by step, I approach the bed, but she doesn't move. "Lou?"

She's breathing deeply and evenly. Maybe she's so exhausted from the argument that she fell asleep—she isn't healthy yet after all.

With a deep sigh, I release the key from my belt and unlock the cuff around her wrist. She mumbles something under her breath and pushes her free hand under her cheek, but her eyes remain closed.

I look at her with a hollow feeling in my chest.

So dark… Mom…

The boy's voice fills me like a perpetual echo. I mechanically clutch the iron chain still attached to the wall anchor.

Come back…where are you, Mom?

The smell of wood stain emanates from somewhere far off. The ground beneath my feet quakes like it did on Quiet Lake. Shades of gray flicker in my vision. Shakily, I unlock the handcuffs that hold the chain to the anchor, grab more chains from the closet, and jump down the RV steps.

So dark, dark, dark…

My chest and stomach contract painfully, a dark flood filling my mind. I need a tree, something to tie myself to… Suddenly, I'm in the middle of the forest, stumbling through the deadwood with leaden feet, feeling scratchy twigs on my face. On a tall spruce, I connect the steel chains and loop them around the trunk, but then I realize I still have the key with me. I need it to close the handcuffs. Once done, I can't throw it into the woods where Lou would never find it.

Heart pounding, I dash back, crashing through the undergrowth and yanking a master key from the carabiner. Panicking, I dig a thin string out of my pocket and thread it shakily through the eye of the key. Where to put it? Where? My gaze falls on the side mirror and I

breathe a sigh of relief. In no time at all, I hang it there just in time. The darkness within me swallows the forest and the trees. Everything grows dark as if the world only consists of shadows.

Can't breathe…so dark…

The feeling of asphyxiation burns my lungs. I stumble back blindly, banging both my shoulders on wood and branches until I reach the tree with the chains.

Like the night of the thunderstorm, I tie myself to the trunk, my hands cuffed, the iron chains fastened to the spruce like a leash. Again and again, the earth shakes beneath me and I stagger sideways like a drunk. When I'm secured, I toss the original key into the undergrowth.

One, two, three, four…

The ground gives way.

Black swirls pass by me. I land on something hard with a thud. I look around confused. The little boy stands in front of me and looks down at me with his timeless gaze. Blood is running from his nose and his reddened eyes have green-blue shiners.

He shakes his head with a serious expression. I know what he's going to say and beat him to it. "I'll go."

"You have no idea, do you?" He rubs his pants with his hands. "You don't remember what it's like to be there?"

"I do," I reply reluctantly. "Of course I remember how it was."

The little boy laughs and a torrent of mockery pours over me.

Screams ring out from somewhere. Terrible screams like I've never heard before.

"I am you!" I say when it's quiet again and he stays silent.

"What you feel is merely an echo of the pain." The boy turns on his bare feet and walks down the dark corridor I saw so many times as a child. The notch in the floor, the uneven threshold, the door behind which lie all the horrors I fear.

"Brendan, wait!" I yell, scrambling to my feet. He doesn't respond; suddenly seems to be somewhere else. The horrible wails pierce my eardrums again.

"Bren!" I yell when it has quieted down.

"I don't have a name, you know that!" he says angrily now.

"Of course you have a name," I call after him, suddenly angry at him for not letting me get close to him. "He called you all sorts of things, but your name is Brendan. You simply forgot about it for a long time." For a very long time. So long, so dark.

"I am nothing, nothing doesn't need a name," the boy whispers and suddenly stops.

"You are not nothing. You are me. My name is Brendan. I'm twenty-two and my birthday is in January. I love a wonderful girl. This love is not nothing. You're not nothing!"

The boy glances at me over his shoulder, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "Is that true?" he whispers and there is an unbearable sadness in his words. It wants to break my heart.

"Yeah," I choke back, reaching out to him like Lou reached out to me. I want to touch him and tell him that everything will be fine. "He can't hurt you anymore, Bren. He can't hurt us anymore."

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know, but he no longer has power over us. He is gone."

"And yet he's always there."

"Memories. They are merely memories," I say softly, stepping toward the boy. "It's over." He can't slip away from me anymore.

Suddenly, he looks as withdrawn as before. "I have to protect you. From these memories," he says with childish determination.

Without further explanation, he starts to run. He pushes open the door to the basement and this time I run after him. With an outstretched arm, I catch the closing door, hold it open, and take a few steps into the darkness.

"Brendan?" I call out.

Silence.

Then, in a second, the darkness is torn apart like a curtain. My eyes light up and I see the monster bending over the little boy, grabbing him by the collar, and dragging him toward the black coffin.

Full of rage, I throw myself at the man, but I can't reach him as he vanishes like air between my fingers.

"You filthy bastard of a godless whore! I'll kill you!" he yells at the boy. I want to grab him, but in my hands, there's a strange jolt and pain shoots up my wrists.

"Bren?" I hear someone gasp. I look around, confused. "Bren, it's Lou."

"I'll kill you," someone yells, and I think it's the monster screaming at the boy.

"No," whispers a girl's voice in front of me. "You will not. You love me!"

Suddenly, there is the picture of the blonde woman again, of my Little Miss Sunshine. Warmth and sadness wash over my heart. It feels as if it has been broken multiple times, I miss her so much.

"You left me," I say miserably. "You left…it was so dark…do you know what it was like, there, underground…"

"Yes. I know." That's Lou. I understand she's somewhere in my darkness. She speaks to me tentatively, holding me tight like I wanted to hold the boy. "Everything was quiet. You were alone. In every pause between two heartbeats, you thought you died. And when you thought you were dead, you were still alone. Even when you were outside again. You longed for your mother's arms, but she never came back."

"How could you leave me?" It's not my mom. I know deep down, but the words come anyway. And with them a feeling of loneliness so vast that there is no word for it. Cold creeps into my marrow, making me shiver. It's as if my bones could break one by one. I want to scream but I remain silent. I can't even raise my hand to reach out to Lou.

"Maybe…maybe she didn't leave you," I hear her say and I cling to her voice like I've unconsciously done so many times before. "Something could have happened to her, too. Maybe someone kidnapped her. Maybe whoever did this to you also made sure she didn't find you. Or that she'd never come back."

The words dance around me in a black-and-white fog. I understand the content, but I can't sort it. It's just so good to hear her voice. It's like she takes the cold out of my limbs. I squint a few

times to clear my vision and spot Lou. She is lying on her back on the ground. Strange. Why is she on the ground?

I shake my head in bewilderment. "Lou?" My throat is itchy and I'm hoarse. "What are you doing here?"

Lou lets out a dry sob. "Bren, thank God…" Did I knock her over? Is that why she's on the ground?

Her gaze wanders over me, fear and worry reflected in it.

"You're hurt," she says breathlessly, pointing to my wrists. I follow her gesture and discover dark red blood oozing from under the iron rings trickling into my palms. She's on the ground worried that *I'm* hurt!

"Better me than you," I answer curtly, yanking at the chain, but I hardly feel the pain. The other colder pain inside me is much stronger and I feel it more every second. At the same time, my field of vision shrinks into a tunnel again.

So dark, I hear the boy whimper. *So dark…get me out of here!*

I peer anxiously at Lou, thinking of Jordan Price. In any case, I must not knock her down again. "You have to go back inside immediately," I instruct her.

"No." Lou pulls herself to her feet and staggers.

I can't breathe…can't…

"Let me stay with you." Lou could have said it or I could have said it myself to the boy. Again, I hear those terrifying screams, half man, half battered beast. I have to get away from here. Bent over, I stumble forward, wood shattering around me. A man's ragged breath fills the darkness.

"Brendan…"

Wildly, I spin in circles, catch a glimpse of a specter, and blink into the night. Lou is only a few steps away from me between the dark trees. Again, her brightness reminds me of a little ghost. So delicate and translucent. She looks at me, deep inside me. She knows everything. She is afraid and yet she is here. She didn't let me down. *Come to me, Lou*, I want to whisper, *I never want to hurt you again*, but I'm motionless, unable to speak or move. I need all my strength to stay in the here and now.

As if she could hear my thoughts, she takes a tiny step toward me. And another. Like back at the lake.

Hold me, Lou! Hold me and never let go! Never again.

I want to pull her toward me, but my body won't respond. And my mind knows it's too dangerous and I'd have to yell at her to make her walk away. But Lou is so close that we touch. With a soft gasp, she wraps her arms around me and her head lands against my chest.

The longing to feel her is stronger than reason. I drown, fly, fall. My consciousness sinks downward to the boy and my heart fills with pity when I find him in torn pants in the dark hole. He is so small. He has waited so long for salvation and even longer for love. He's not worthless, merely lonely, confused, and scared to death. It's not his fault his parents didn't want him. It is not his fault he was tortured and abused. He is a good man.

"Hey, Bren," I say quietly.

He looks up at me wide-eyed. "You came back," he whispers and the disbelief with which he says it makes my heart ache.

"I won't leave you alone anymore," I promise. "I can take care of you now. You just have to come with me, to my time." I give him my hand, and with a scared look, he places his small one in my big one. His fingers are stiff from the cold, the contact awkward as if he doesn't know how to touch me.

"You're doing great," I say with a smile.

He smiles back shyly. "You're not lying?"

"No. I can take whatever you carry." I pull him with me, and suddenly, the darkness blows to the side and we are standing in a sparse forest between spruces and birches. The sky is bright blue, northern-sky blue, without a single cloud.

We're still holding hands. A mild breeze ruffles my hair. I look down at the boy and see a smile. I can feel it on my face. It is not an echo or a reflection. It is my own. Carefully, I take the boy into my arms and hold him tight.

And his body becomes my body and I feel myself being held. By Lou. And by myself. I am the boy and the boy is me.

"I won't leave you, Bren," I hear Lou whisper against my chest.

"You're crazy." I feel dizzy, not just from her words, but because it suddenly feels like my memories mingle with the boy's. I'm realizing again how dangerous it is for Lou to be here with me. I try to free my arms from her grip, but Lou resists.

"You can hit and kick me in your madness, but I won't go. You can push me away, but I'm staying," she says with grim determination, purposefully wrapping her arms even tighter around my waist.

"I can't let that happen," I choke out.

"You have no choice. You said I was merely pretending, but that's not true. I love you."

I groan. Now is definitely not the best time to talk about it since the flash isn't over.

As gently as I can, I take Lou's head in my hands. "I know, Lou," I whisper. "I know." I gently stroke her cheeks and they get wet from the blood on my hands and her tears. "I honestly was considering letting you go. Deep down, I was probably searching for a reason not to. At that moment, I wanted to believe you were playing me the entire time. I wanted to be mad at you."

She laughs and cries at the same time. *Crazy*. How is this supposed to work?

"Hey, Lou, don't cry," I scold affectionately. "Shh. All is well. I'm sorry for what I said." The feeling of foreign images in me intensifies and sends a chill through my limbs. Something is happening to me, but I don't know what. I quickly free myself from Lou's arms. "You have to go, quick!"

"No, I'm staying!" Lou says without taking her eyes off me. "And the next time you're in that place you dread, imagine if I were there, too."

"Lou…" Sweat pools on the back of my neck. I want to tell her it's a bad idea because I don't know how it will be this time, but she's faster.

"Please do it! Just try it!"

"What if it doesn't work? What if I attack you?" My body trembles as if electrified.

"I'll stay anyway."

When did she wrap her arms around me again? I have no idea. Suddenly, it feels like I'm standing at the bottom of a well. Something rushes toward me from above. A flood. Images race through my mind in quick succession. *A chocolate-covered birthday cake with three white candles, blue pirate balloons on the ceiling and confetti on the table. "Blow them out and make a wish," I hear my mom say happily. Her cheeks are flushed, but her right eye is bloodshot and swollen. I puff out my cheeks and blow, and hot wax squirts onto the paper tablecloth. Smoke rises. "Hey, that was great, Brenny. All three in one go!" My mom laughs and wraps her arms around me and lifts me up. I inhale her scent. Vanilla lemon. "And your wish?" she asks in a whisper. "I want to get away from him. With you, away from him," I whisper back.*

The memory fades. Other pictures follow. My mom's gone, I'm in someone else's house, in a shabby kitchen made of patchwork cupboards. Everything is unfamiliar, dark, and eerie. Before my feet is a lake of spilled milk. The man Mom called my daddy approaches me with a wide leather belt. The corners of his mouth turn down, his eyes narrow like sickles. I sense the danger, run away, and crouch in a corner, but it's in vain. His hatred rains down on me. The leather hisses through the air, exploding with a smack against my skin. The burning is all-encompassing, blinding me. The man yells that my mom left me because she didn't want a shit like me for a son. That burns even harder than the leather. Pain shoots up behind my eyes, into every cell of my body.

My torso convulses under the weight of the memory. I don't want to feel this. Red mist fills my head.

"Scream already!" I hear Lou whisper piercingly. "Just scream, no one can hear you. Just me. And I can take it. I'll stick around."

More images fill me.

I lie in the dark, hands braced against the thick wood, but I can't get at the six clasps. My upper arm muscles are burning. "Mom!" I scream in my head. "Mom! Come back!" My fear is mixed with blazing pain. "Why did you leave? Why did you leave me behind? I wanted to go with you. I wished for it!" Nothing happens. Everything remains quiet. So quiet. Even my own heart grows as quiet as the

dark. I can't take it. The pain is so great. I can't breathe, I can't breathe, Mom, it's so dark.

Seconds tick by. Minutes. My fingernails are wet, probably bleeding from trying to scratch a hole in the lid. But that's useless. Everything hurts. My broken skin is blazing from the beatings, on my back, stomach, arms, and legs. I feel a pang of thirst and the deafening noise of silence. Hunger eats away at my stomach and my pants are cold and stiff. Someone is crying. Suddenly, the lid opens and it gets so bright, it's like I'm standing in heaven with a thousand angels.

But only he is there.

He pulls me out of the box and throws me to the ground.

"You're crying."

"N-no, sir…" But I am crying.

"I should kill you," he hisses horribly. He bends down, grabs my throat, and slams me against the basement wall.

"Bren, don't…" There's that voice again. I hear it as if a dream.

"You're nothing, little bastard. Nothing. Ash and dust. I could kill you and no one would know. Nobody would miss you."

His words burn inside me as does the pressure of his fingers on my throat. For seconds, I wish he would kill me, but I know he won't because then he won't be able to torment me anymore. As I whimper helplessly, his face twists into a sneering mask. "I'll put you in a coffin and bury you in the backyard. This time, though, I won't free you. You can shit your pants in there all you want and die in your own filth. How would you like that?" His cold gray eyes regard me like a hungry predator. "Answer me!"

"Bren…stop…you're…not…him…" Someone sobs. Who is that?

"Your pathetic whimpering won't help you now, you weakling!" I hear the monster roar. Or am I yelling? Out of reflex, I grip my hand tighter around something I'm holding.

"Bren…" A hand tugs at my fingers. "I love you…please come back to me!"

My body freezes. That's Lou, isn't it? Confused, I try to fight the images in me. *These are only memories*, says a voice inside me. *Only memories. It's over, you said so yourself*.

Deep inside me, my mom smiles at me and a tremendous longing grabs me. Make a wish! she says softly.

"Do…not…leave…me! Come back!"

My heart clenches. Lou is crying. Now I can hear it clearly. "Please…come back." Where is she? I shake my head to get a clearer picture. "Brendan, please…"

Suddenly, she appears in front of me, very close. Why is she crying and why is she saying not to leave her? "I'm with you, Lou," I whisper harshly. Then my eyes notice my hand that is wrapped around her throat. The shock is so great that I want to fall to my knees. I'm grabbing her by the throat and choking her like the monster choked me! *God, don't let anything happen to her!* As gently as if her neck were glass and my hand concrete, I withdraw my fingers.

Lou's legs sag, but I catch her and hug her. With horror, I notice the red imprint of my hands on her skin. She is so still, so terribly pale, with panic reflected in her eyes.

"Lou, say something, please…" I beg her.

Panting, she clutches my upper arms while tears run down her cheeks. She tries to smile but fails. *You don't have to be brave*, I want to whisper, but I can't get a word out because the second smile works.

Something is shattering me into a thousand pieces. How can she smile? I shake my head dumbly. "Forgive me…Lou…" I murmur. "I won't allow you to do this again!" I brush tears from her cheeks with my fingertips.

Lou blinks, seemingly only now recognizing me. "It wasn't that bad," she whispers, exhausted. Her voice sounds raspy.

I clench my jaw until my joints hurt. "You're lying. You're shaking like crazy."

"I'm merely cold."

"Lou, my hand was around your throat and you say it wasn't that bad?" I lift her chin. Despite the darkness, I can make out the finger streaks running around her throat. "Fucking shit!" I blurt out angrily. "You can't be with me when I'm freaking out. This is madness. Just believe me!"

"I believe you, but I'll do it anyway," Lou says adamantly. "Besides, you came back—that's all that matters."

I bend down to her until my forehead is against hers. Her breath brushes my chin and all I want to do is protect her. "I won't let you put yourself in danger again."

"You have to." She punches my chest teasingly with her fist. "You're the one chained to the tree like a dog on a leash, not me."

I laugh, but it sounds tired and lacks amusement. "Then at least let me carry you to the fire." I bend down and put one arm behind her back and the other behind her knees. She is light, but my body feels as if it had lain in the lonely coffin for ten days without food or water. My legs are shaking, but I make it to the fire with the clinking chain. I carefully set Lou down and drop to the ground behind her. I slide close to her, my legs to the right and left of her to warm her from all sides. Her back leans against my stomach.

Wearily, she rests her head against my chest and puts her hands on my arms. We sit there like two halves that broke apart and have now been painstakingly put together.

"Don't ever let go of me, Lou. Never again," I say in a whisper.

"I won't," Lou whispers back.

We are both silent for a while when I hear the wolf pack howling in the distance. At that moment, it no longer sounds lonely but simply primal and wild.

I stroke Lou's hair with shaky fingers, realizing again how vulnerable she is. I know she wants to stay with me during the flashes and prove her love to me, but I can't let that go on. "When the next attack comes, keep your distance, understand?" I say, twisting a strand of her hair around my finger.

"Bren…"

"Promise me!" I interrupt her before she can say more than my name. Maybe it's the desperation in my voice that makes her nod. I am immensely relieved.

"But I'm only staying a few feet away," she adds. "So, when you need me, I'll be there."

I can't answer her. I bend down to her, and at the same time, she turns her head in my direction, reaching out for me.

Our lips meet somewhere in the middle, and when I feel her tongue, a wild shiver races across my skin. Hot and cold, like fire and stars. Lou tastes like our night at the lake, like tears, peppermint, and raspberries. Everything merges together as if there are no boundaries between us.

I know I shouldn't do this. I know what's in store for me tomorrow and that the flashback isn't over. But none of that matters in these seconds. For a moment, I want to allow the dream to expand inside me and push back the darkness. Longingly, I hug Lou tighter. I feel her heartbeat on my chest in time with mine, together like howling wolves, and the forest, the aurora borealis and northern sky, and the moon and stars. Again, I sink into the depths, but this time it is no longer dark.

Early in the morning, I sit at the RV's table, feeding Grey a double helping of milk. The night and the flashes that followed the first have left me so exhausted, I can barely keep my eyes open. A crushing pain pierces the back of my head like a dowel, but I'm still not allowed to rest.

I bend over and peer down the aisle at Lou stretched out on the bed, fast asleep. She looks so incredibly peaceful. I almost convince myself she's too happy to let her go, but that's merely wishful thinking. Last night proved that it's too dangerous to be around me, whether I found a part of myself or not.

All the new memories inside me, the boy's memories—mine!—that have been repressed for so long, drift through my senses like ghosts. Images flash before me. Some are elusive as if they haven't found the place they deserve yet.

I recall the words the psychologist told me, that there could be more to the blackouts than just flashbacks. I'm now willing to believe it, but I have no idea what to call the phenomenon.

I absentmindedly rub my sore eyes and set Grey back in his nest of fleece. I pace restlessly up and down the aisle. What am I to do? "Grey, what should I do?" I repeat the words over and over—ridiculous.

There is only one answer and I’ve known it for a long time.

CHAPTER 32

I scrub the blood from my hands under an ice-cold shower and let the water run gently over the torn skin on my wrists. The left one looks especially bad. I dab iodine on it and wrap it in a bandage. Afterward, I look in the mirror of the hanging cupboard. There is a bump on my forehead with a deep gash running through the middle. I put a Band-Aid on it, surprised that I hardly feel any pain. I can only feel it as if through a thick layer of cotton.

As I ready the RV to leave, bitter nausea spreads through my stomach. Any further thought of what is to come is unbearable. I calm myself down, tell myself I could always go back, nothing is final, though I've never brazenly lied to myself. If I don't let Lou go today, I'm afraid I'll never be able to do it. Today, the memory of my fingers around her throat is fresh, my reasoning knows better than my instincts—perhaps for the first time since I kidnapped Lou.

I get up around six in the morning. The RV bumps over the gravel and I have to clench my teeth to keep from screaming. This time, after a short stretch on the forest road, I take a different route than on the way here. It is a shortcut that is only passable in one direction due to the slope. My destination is the nearest town with access to the Greyhound buses.

The spruces, rivers, and mountain lakes pass me like pale shadows, reminders of so much that I have experienced in the Yukon. Infinite loneliness, fear, but also deep love.

Eventually, I get on Highway 4 to Watson Lake. The sky is lead gray as if a higher power has swallowed the light—it is oppressive. I feel empty and hollow—like a receptacle from which the last drops of water have flowed. The only thing I feel is fear. The entire ride, it sits like a lump of ice in my chest and I can neither breathe it away nor deny it. And as if Grey were a mirror of my feelings, he repeatedly whimpers to himself. Shortly after Watson Lake, I set him in the passenger seat so his crying doesn't wake Lou prematurely. Since then, as if in protest, he's been throwing up every quarter of an hour and I can't stop on the side of the road to wipe away the wolf's puke.

Normally, I probably would have scolded him, half-serious, half-amused, but today I just silently wipe the mess up and pat him on the head. It's not his fault he's not the ideal travel companion.

In the afternoon, after many hours of driving, I arrive in Hudson's Hope, a small town in British Columbia with a modest shopping center and a bus station. I certainly won't find anything better for Lou today.

I park the RV in the back of the gray parking lot and draw the curtains. I don't want Lou to see where we are right away, I want to surprise her. Of course, drawing the curtains is not fully altruistic, either. I would like to be alone with her again, to hug her again, without her knowing it is farewell.

My throat burns at the thought and I swallow the heat and congestion. I don't know how Lou will take it. All these weeks she wanted nothing more than to get away from me. And when I told her yesterday that I had considered letting her go, she was overwhelmed. But she didn't scream at the river. It's possible that she doesn't want to leave me anymore. Maybe she was overwhelmed because she felt it was the greatest proof of love she could ever get from me. Just like she did for me under the willow tree by the riverbank. But what should I do if she doesn't want to break up with me? How do I make her understand that it's best for her?

I wipe my forehead wearily as if that would clear all these thoughts out of my head. With cold fingers, I dig my cell phone out

of the cupboard above the side door and turn it on. Then, I google the bus schedules from Hudson's Hope to Calgary and from there on through the states of Montana and Idaho to Nevada—Ash Springs. It's going to be a long journey. It reminds me of the time in Los Angeles in the Walmart parking lot, jotting down the things I needed for Lou. A spark of melancholy runs like an echo through my veins. At that time, I was full of hope for a better life. Those days, I actually thought I loved Lou. I figured a few pictures, a laugh, and all the information were enough to know someone.

In truth, however, I still don't truly know Lou even if she's closer to me than any human has ever been. Being close and knowing someone doesn't necessarily go hand in hand.

I smooth the paper with one hand before folding the note and stuffing it into a yellow backpack. After that, I make mayo, ham, and cheese sandwiches, and sneak out the back to find Lou a change of clothes. As I do so, I discover the neatly folded newspaper articles I gave her so she would eat. So, this is where she kept them the whole time! Without thinking twice, I put them in the backpack along with the clothes, water, money, and provisions.

Finally, there is nothing left to do but wait for Lou to wake up.

I sit down at the table and stare straight ahead. I've never feared anything more than the moment Lou leaves me. I try not to think about anything, but I can't get this scene out of my head: Lou crossing the parking lot and disappearing out of my life like she never existed. After a while, I realize I'm toying with the silver coin on my leather strap.

Memories try to surface, but I can't think of that right now. Not yet—not while Lou's still here. Instead, I untie the coin from the band. It was always my anchor, reminding me that I have a past beyond Thorson Ave. A memory of my mom. A sign that I exist. Today, I'm brimming with feelings, and even though they're incredibly painful, I know who I am.

The coin would be a nice keepsake for Lou. Something I can give her so she won't forget me. Or maybe she will put the coin down the day she realizes she never really loved me and her love was just a

need for closeness. I tell myself that would be okay, but obviously it's a lie.

I quietly go to the back, and at the risk of waking her up, I attach the silver coin to the pendant on the chain that also holds her brothers' pendants. It fits seamlessly as if the space had always been reserved for it.

I trace Lou's silhouette in the air with my fingertips. Her eyelids are dark, almost black, and her cheeks are narrow and hollow. Despite the contentment she exudes in her sleep, I can't deny how sick and tired she looks. The marks on her neck have faded a bit, but they still seem like a dark reminder to me.

"Time to go home, Lou," I whisper to her. "It's time…to go home."

I turn on the generator and put on coffee. Maybe it's the noise that wakes Lou up, in any case, she stretches like a cat after a long nap. And as much as I wish she would roll over and go back to sleep, at the same time, I'm glad it'll be over soon.

"Hey, sleepyhead," I say as she sits up and I put the last of the pancakes in the toaster.

"Hey." Her voice sounds hoarse. She feels her neck carefully, but stops as soon as I look at her.

"What time is it?" she asks, diverting attention so I don't feel so bad.

"Afternoon."

Lou scrambles off the bed and approaches me in her wrinkled jeans and heavy sweater. Her expression is serious and tranquil as she looks at me. I hug her without saying a word. Her body is soft and tender and utterly exhausted, fitting seamlessly with mine like a missing puzzle piece. Suddenly, everything is there again. Last night, the feeling of belonging together and being able to get through anything together.

What would have become of us if I hadn't kidnapped her? Burning regret shoots through my heart as I realize how much easier it could have been.

You know I wouldn't have said no, Lou said to me once, but now it's too late.

I will never know how it would have been or if my flashes would have ruined everything.

Lou hugs me and I think about that stupid teddy bear mobile.

Mother, father, child.

It's all over, but it feels like it's only the beginning. An insane thought makes me realize that Lou and I would never have bonded this deeply if we had met in a normal situation. Lou would never have been who she is today and I probably never would have gotten my memories back. So, what is better for Lou? Is the new, quiet, more serious Lou happier than the carefree one? I know no one can ever answer that question for me. I don't even have the right to ask. Maybe I don't want the answer or there isn't one.

I bend down to her and inhale her scent. No longer Nivea lemon, but firewood, smoke, and forest. Yukon.

When the coffee machine stops dripping, we let go at the same time. I lift Lou's head a little to get a closer look at the bruises on her neck. Silently, I curse myself again. If I had any remaining doubts, the sight of my red fingerprints on her throat silence them for good. Lou notices my distress even if I don't say anything and she quickly disappears into the bathroom.

When she comes out, she's wearing fresh jeans and a yellow scarf with tiny colorful hearts. With a dark feeling in my chest, I notice she's wearing the white blouse she wore to the campground.

I force a smile on my face and point to the table I set in her absence. "Sit."

As I turn off the generator, Lou slides onto the bench. She looks around with a frown. "Why are the curtains drawn?"

"I wanted you to sleep as long as possible. It was, after all, light outside when we went to bed." It's damn hard to lie to her. I can't maintain eye contact and stare at the pattern on the curtains. "Besides, I somehow found it more romantic," I quickly add.

"Want to stay in here with me for the rest of today?" she teases.

I play along. "I can think of a few things I'd like to do with you…" I try to joke, winking at her.

Lou winks back, puts her head in her hands, and stares at the dishes like there's nothing more interesting in the world. Can she

feel my restlessness? I can't tell, maybe I'm acting differently.

Suddenly, she straightens up and looks around. "Where's Grey?" she asks, alarmed.

Deliberately calm, I pour coffee into two mugs, place them on the table in front of Lou, and arrange the pancakes on top of each other. "He's in the passenger seat. Best leave him alone, he's been puking all morning."

"He threw up? Is he sick?"

I sit next to her on the bench. "Don't worry. He probably ate something rotten in the forest. I'll have to give him meat soon before he starts eating half-decayed carcasses."

Lou appears relieved and smiles at me so sweetly it hurts. "I remember that vomit thing. But I won't do that! You're welcome to do it." How her eyes sparkle, despite her exhaustion. She leans into me and I swallow several times in a row. It won't be long and I'll be sitting here alone like before. Then she'll be gone and I'll never be able to touch her again, never see her smile again. Cold creeps through my veins. I push the last thought away. I don't want to think about it when she's still so close to me.

"You haven't slept at all," she says all of a sudden, and I feel her scrutinizing sideways glance. "If you've been wiping away wolf puke all morning, you can't have slept."

"Yes, that's right," I admit. I must tell her. I'm sure she senses that something is off. It would be unfair to keep it from her any longer. I gesture with my chin at the pancakes and lemon cookies I bought at Walmart back then. "Eat something, please, Lou. You need to get your strength back."

She smiles again, a real Lou smile, just a little wearier after last night. "Then you have to eat, too."

"Okay." I stare at the pancake, but I can't eat it. At least she eats a bit. She has to be fit for the long trip, I don't want her to collapse along the way. Maybe I should pack her more water. Maybe I still have to…

"What's wrong, Bren?" Her impatient voice snaps me out of my thoughts. She energetically pulls the pancake out of my fingers and flings it onto the plate. "Say it!"

There's no point in keeping it from her anymore. "Okay." Shakily, I grab her warm hands, and as if Lou can sense my tension, she immediately stiffens.

"That day by the river when you didn't call out to the men…" I begin, forcing myself to keep my voice steady. "You made a decision that was right for you at that moment. Or maybe it was wrong and it just felt right. I don't know."

"It still is right," Lou says so firmly that a hint of a smile crosses my face.

"Maybe today. Maybe for you," I reply softly. "But what about your family? What about your brothers?"

Lou swallows and her eyes fill with tears. I squeeze her fingers tightly.

"What if in five years, we break up? Then I stole a part of your life and deprived you of an education. And you will hate me."

"I could never hate you," she replies a bit muffled. When she looks at me, her face is as open as a book. She is pale, her lips thin, but her eyes sparkle with deep, sincere love.

I carefully guide our intertwined fingers to my cheek, my belly full of burning desire for her closeness. "I believe that you love me, Lou. Please, don't think otherwise." I bow my head. "But what if this love grew only because you were so lonely? Like you were the victim who fell in love with her kidnapper?"

Her expression looks pained. "Bren, what do you want to hear? What am I supposed to say? I don't even know myself. I just know that I love you. I already liked you in the visitor center. I would have fallen in love with you anyway."

"I'm not sure you're in a position to judge properly at this point, Lou. So, I decided to make the decision for you."

"What decision? What do you want?" A dark shadow crosses her face.

I press my lips together, but something happens to my eyes. They get wet and my vision blurs.

"*Maybe* is a yes," I whisper harshly. *Maybe is a yes*. "And *someday* is today." Good God, I don't want to cry. If I cry now, I won't be able to stop crying and I can't do that to Lou. She should

not leave me with the burden of pity and sorrow. I bite my lip hard and taste blood.

Lou looks at me in complete dismay. "You want…you want to let me go? Today?" The intensity of her confusion disturbs me even more.

"I don't want to, Lou, but I must. It is too dangerous. Yesterday, I choked you like my stepfather did to me. What am I going to do tomorrow…?" I look at her, but I have the feeling she doesn't hear me at all, as if she's far away. "Believe me, I would love nothing more than to stay in the Yukon with you for the rest of my life. Far away from the world and all other people. I would wish for nothing more. If there was a way that would be fair to you, Lou…but there isn't. We don't even know what your feelings for me are based on…" Her blue eyes are like two lakes about to overflow. "Lou?" I whisper softly. "Lou…do you hear what I'm saying?"

She quickly shakes her head. "You can't just send me away," she chokes out breathlessly. "I won't go."

I get up and pull back the RV curtains so she can see where we are. Maybe that will make her realize how serious I am. Maybe she feels something like joy under her bewilderment. When I turn to her, I feel even more miserable. With a stony expression, Lou stares out, almost as rigid as when she sat at the back of the bed, frightened and lost.

"Bren…" she whispers. "How…I mean…what…" Stiffly, she rises and walks to the window by the sink, pushing back the curtain.

I can't possibly tell what's going on inside her. She peers outside as if it were a strange world that she no longer fits into. Just like I've felt over the years when I've had to return to civilization. No, like I've always felt, even after Thorson Ave.

"I've been driving all day. You…you slept deeply and didn't notice anything. I wanted to surprise you," I try to explain to her.

"Grey didn't eat something bad," she says darkly. She sounds like she is completely alone in the world.

"He didn't enjoy the ride." I put my hands over my eyes. The thought that she might not be able to cope with reality because of what I did to her weighs like an iron weight on my shoulders.

"Why…why, Bren? I don't understand…"

I lower my fingers. She has turned around, still looking at me with absolute incomprehension. I slowly approach her and wrap my arms around her back. I pull her to me like I never want to let her go. The long branches of the willow appear in front of me as well as the dark blue water and Lou's shiny body on the wet sand. "You don't know?" I whisper hoarsely.

"Yes," she whispers against my shoulder. "But why today? Why after yesterday?"

"The question is if not today, when?" I step back a little and take her head in my hands to get a better look at her. She looks back frightened, her lips trembling. She doesn't understand. She may not understand how much I am still fighting myself. A man can find memories he has repressed, he can become someone else, but a part of his former self will never be erased, even if he does become a better person. That part is still in me and that part wants to keep Lou. Possessive and absolute. He remembers their encounter at the visitor center and Lou's big blue eyes full of naivety and trust. "I'm afraid I'll change my mind if I don't let you go right now. Right now, do you understand?"

Her gaze flickers. "Now?"

I gently stroke her face, though I'd rather hit something. "There is no other way."

"No…" Lou's fingers tighten on my shoulders.

I feel her horror as I do my own. Cold, naked fear washes over me like a wave, paralyzing my thinking. I am going to go crazy. Once Lou is gone, I'll go mad with grief and longing. My heart pounds. Numbly, I pull Lou to me, bend down, and rest my forehead against hers. God, it feels so good. No human being has ever meant so much to me and nothing has ever seemed harder. Even lying quietly in my narrow grave seems easier to me at this moment. When she's gone, I'll never be able to fill that warm spot in my heart again. It will be colder there than that icy December day. And yet it is the right thing to do. It's the most horrible and best thing I've ever done.

"Lou." I put into my words whatever warmth she inspires in me. "Trust me. It's better this way. One day, you will know that it was the right decision. Maybe not today, but someday."

"What about you?" she chokes out. "What will happen when you have another flashback?"

"After tonight… I'll just pretend you're with me." It's not the flashbacks I fear. As I let her go, I feel like I'm losing a part of me forever. "You've done so much for me, Lou. So much. All I can…must do for you is let you go…because I love you." I walk to the door and yank it open. There's a sadness inside of me I know I'll never get rid of in my life.

Lou stands stock-still. The smell of garbage and exhaust fumes waft into the RV. Lou seems out of place in it. She belongs in the forest, in the Yukon, with me.

"You really should go before I change my mind."

"I'll say I ran away," Lou suddenly says monotonously.

"Your brothers will despise you for it."

"Ethan maybe."

I have to think about what went through my head the other day. "You can also tell them the truth," I reply calmly. I don't want her to ruin her relationship with her brothers for me. That would be horrible. But I think Lou would have a bigger problem seeing me in a cell than I would, so I quickly add, "The police won't find me."

Lou stares at me for a long time. I see her struggle as she fights her tears and her resistance to climb down the steps. It seems to demand everything she has left in terms of strength.

"Where am I?" she suddenly wants to know in a firm voice.

There you go. You can do it, Lou! "We're in British Columbia, Canada." I quickly get the packed backpack out of the closet. "Money, provisions, a change of clothes, and the newspaper articles." I point through the door at the building. "A quarter of a mile ahead is a shopping center and a bus stop. Greyhound buses will take you to any major city. From there, you transfer. I've packed you a list of time schedules and stops. Googled it on the Samsung."

She looks at me in shock. "You have a cell phone?"

Not a good idea to tell her that. She shouldn't be able to reach me, that's what's best for her. "I have no signal up there, Lou. Besides, it's better if you don't hear from me again for the time being." The thing about the reception isn't even a lie because although I usually have Internet access, the telephone connection is abysmal.

"I see." She swallows dryly.

I smile and can hardly see her because my eyes are filled with tears. "Yes, soon you will understand." It tears me up to speak as if I want this.

She looks across the dreary parking lot at the shopping mall. "Can you promise me something?"

"Depends."

"Will you come back to Sequoia on June twenty-fifth next year? To the visitor center?"

My stomach tightens. I'm speechless.

"That was the day you kidnapped me."

I laugh briefly, despite my sadness. "I know." How could I ever forget?

"If we still love each other, then we'll spend the summer together." Lou's gaze returns to me, filled with hope and something I can't name.

My hands grip the straps of the backpack. It would be a sweet dream to pursue that thought, to have something to hold on to all the time, but it would be unfair to her. "I don't know if that would be good, Lou. It would be better if you forgot me. And it would certainly be better for me if I forgot you."

Lou reaches out to me, giving me the impression she wants to touch me. "Think about it," she whispers and grabs the shoulder strap that I still grip like a life preserver. Then, without another word, she descends the steps. It's like I'm only now understanding. I'm losing her. I'm losing Lou. Terror spreads inside me like a black ocean, filling my lungs. She can't just go like that! All my muscles stiffen. I want to go after her, grab her, pull her back, kiss her, love her, but I can't move.

At the bottom of the stairs, she stops as if waiting for something, but I can't say anything. All words are gone.

"Bye, Bren," she whispers, a weightless breath on the wind, and then she runs.

I bite my knuckles, my heart pounding heavy and hard in my chest. *Wait!* I want to scream, but I'm still mute and I watch Lou run step by step further away from me.

This didn't just happen. I didn't let her go. I couldn't!

Lou, wait. Please wait! For a moment, I want to rush after her and bring her back. Tell her I'll never ever let her go, but of course I won't.

Knees shaking, I sink onto the RV's steps and sit there. I fight back the tears with difficulty while Lou's outline turns gray and merges with the surroundings. My little, brave, strong, crazy, warmhearted girl. Soon, she's merely a dot, and then, she's gone. Just gone.

Everything is kind of easy for you, isn't it?

But this was not. She knows how hard it is for me and she made it easy for me. The way she made everything light, even my heart.

I stare at the parking lot, paralyzed, unable to do anything. I can't move, I can't breathe, I can't scream. My fists want to smash something, but I just sit there and stare off into the distance. Everything is surreal. It's like I am experiencing a flashback, like I'm not even here.

Grains of dust float by. The parking lot fills with cars, the sky turns lead gray, and a gusty wind sweeps maple leaves and plastic waste across the asphalt.

I don't know how much time passes. Maybe it's only minutes, maybe hours.

Where are you now? Are you already on the bus? Are you okay?

Suddenly, a shadow falls across me. At first, I think it's Lou and raise my head hopefully, but it's only a little blonde girl. Wind plays with her long hair.

My stomach knots in disappointment.

"Why are you crying?" she asks me bluntly.

I make an indistinct sound. "I'm not crying. I never cry."

"Yes, you are." She points to my face.

I wipe my cheeks in irritation. My hands get wet.

"My brother cries too, sometimes. That's okay, I think. He's still quite little." She studies me, her eyes almost as blue as Lou's. For a moment, she seems to consider if it's okay for a man to cry, too. "William cries when he falls and hurts himself. Are you hurting, too?"

"Yes," I whisper, new tears welling up in my eyes. The numbness that gripped me is leaving me. Hot sadness fills my heart, heavy and dark, clutching my chest, squeezing it. I can't breathe for a second, thinking I'm choking on the pain. I groan, grabbing my hair in my fists and yanking at the clumps to feel something else.

"Harper!" A nervous woman's voice echoes over to me. "You're not supposed to run away!" Footsteps approach. I rock back and forth, back and forth, fists in my hair. I suck in air convulsively, a whistling sound. A young woman with a toddler in her arms and a shopping bag in her hand appears next to the RV. She reaches out to the girl. "You shouldn't talk to strangers," she scolds her.

"But he's crying. He hurt himself."

"Well, he'll know what to do."

I lower my arms, palms full of dark hair.

The woman purposefully looks past me.

Harper looks at me pityingly and holds up her hand. "I have to go." She grabs her mother's fingers and lets her pull her along. At some point, she glances over her shoulder. "Put some medicine on it!" she calls out to me. "It will definitely help."

I wipe my face and stand up, limbs stiff. The dull pressure inside me makes me light-headed and dizzy. Everything hurts, every muscle, every bone, every fiber of my body. When I take a breath, my chest burns as if I had pneumonia. With a jerk, I pull the door of the RV closed behind me and sink to the ground. I curl up on the spot and feel my shoulders shake. I clutch my hair again. Deep, heavy sobs break out of me, and I feel like I'm crying for everything right now.

For Lou, my lost childhood, my mom, the person I could have been, and for all my missed opportunities.

CHAPTER 33

The world has become empty and meaningless. The days don't want to go by. It takes an unbearable amount of strength to cope with each and every one and to do everyday things. I'm exhausted, dead tired with grief. The weight lies like lead on my shoulders, making any movement excruciating. Sometimes, it seems to me that someone else is living my life and I am watching him from a great height like an eagle. Occasionally, I give him instructions. *Feed the wolf, drink water, wash yourself*. But he doesn't always do what I tell him.

I couldn't go back to my piece of land after that September day. The mere idea of sitting there alone by the campfire almost killed me. It will never be the same without Lou, there are just too many memories right now.

I drove back to the Yukon, somewhere into *Unorganized Canada*, an area as jumbled as I feel.

My maxillary sinuses hurt from crying so much and the swelling of my eyes doesn't go down anymore. There's a rhythmic pounding in my head, but the pain is nothing compared to the horrific feeling of loss. I hardly sleep at night, tossing and turning, and when I do doze off, I dream of Lou. I don't want to get up in the morning, too caught up in the images and the longing for her.

In the evenings, I sit on the steps of the RV with the door open and watch the day as it slides into night and then a new morning.

Tomorrow will be like yesterday. Just like it used to be. Relentless and lonely.

At some point, it's October and the golden deciduous trees turn burgundy. The wild geese screech more frequently now as the flocks migrate south. Now and again, a shot from poachers echoes through the air.

The sun is already setting in the afternoon, so I sit on the steps in the twilight, fingers numb and feet frozen from the cold gripping of the Yukon. At such moments, Grey comes to me to warm me, but I shoo him away as he reminds me too much of all my happy hours with Lou.

Around mid-October, when the temperatures drop too low, I return to Faro, the place where I have already spent two winters. I rent a shabby house on the edge of the woods where the neighboring house is a quarter mile away. There is some old furniture inside still: an oak table, three chairs with torn upholstery, and an old-fashioned kitchenette with broken cupboard doors. At night, I sleep on a mat, and during the day, I sit huddled on the floor in front of the large south-facing window, staring out at the overgrown yard: at blackberries, wild roses, and birches.

I unpacked some of Lou's clothes and put them around the two floors to make it look like she merely took a brief trip. Besides that, I only get the essentials out of the RV. It's parked in the yard, and every once in a while, I'll sit at the table inside, close my eyes, and try to remember Lou's voice. Rarely do I succeed and then I hear her whispering to me. Things from our night under the willow, things that will forever remain my secret.

The temptation to search for her online is great, but I don't give in to the urge. In the beginning, I read the *Vancouver Sun* online every day, always hoping to find a story about Lou. Maybe a lurid account of her kidnapping along with a new photo. Maybe I was hoping the police would find me and arrest me. At least then I wouldn't have to think about how to proceed. But the article never came. Instead, there was a short, factual message without a photo: *Lantern girl must have run away*. A few lines of text, that was it. Maybe the papers in the States covered more of the story.

So, she stuck to what she said in the parking lot. Somehow, it pierced my heart because it meant she does care about me. And for Grey it matters, of course. What would have become of him if they had put me in jail? But despite my relief, I still have an uneasy feeling because I don't know if Lou's brothers will forgive her. Also, I often think of Los Angeles and Compton, of debt and payment. If I'm not jailed for what I've done, how will I be punished?

Sometimes, sitting apathetically by the window, I stare at the curry-yellow and purple streaks in the dawning sky. The autumn wind makes the birches tremble and a bare twig ticks lazily against the glass. It's as if nature was whispering, just like all the pressing questions inside me that I can't turn off.

Are you all right, Lou? Are you back in school? Do you have nightmares about the things I did to you? Do you dream of the darkness in the box, the narrowness, the fear of death? Do you still think of me?

Will she ever forgive me when she realizes what the summer really meant to her?

Toward the end of October, the smell of autumn gives way to the clear, metallic character of winter. The scar under the leather strap begins to sting, and the next day, bitterly cold winds bring snow and freezing cold from the north. The city sinks under a high blanket of snow. The few residents shovel the streets and I help because I have nothing better to do. In fact, it's the first time I've socialized since renting the house. I had food delivered for Grey, there are enough supplies in the RV, and didn't want to expose myself to the public. Faro is small and people are curious. Many elders are First Nations and generally view intruders with suspicion. Same situation as two years ago. Also, I don't trust my seizures. I haven't had a flash since the day Lou and I broke up. But that means nothing. I didn't have any blackouts in the wilderness either, it only started with the picture of Lou.

And now, after a long time among people again, I try to ignore their looks, grunt *yes* or *no* when asked something, and otherwise

work in silence.

Shoveling the snow, I notice how much my condition has suffered from the lack of exercise and the many cigarettes over the last few weeks. I'm not fit, but the fresh air is good for me. For the first time since September, my head is clearing, my nose is clearing, and I can think better and breathe deeply again.

Even Grey seems to be more upbeat. He jumps around me exuberantly and my conscience bothers me because I haven't been giving him much attention lately. I let him into the yard, but I think he misses the forest as much as I do.

"We're going to go back out there again," I promise him, playfully tossing a snowball in his direction. He pricks up his ears happily, comes to me, and nibbles on my gloves. I smile while at the same time, tears well up in my eyes. "You also miss Lou lots, don't you?"

At the sound of her name, he looks around in confusion, as if she should be right around the corner. Then, he looks at me questioningly and wags his tail excitedly.

"She's not here, Grey," I say quietly. I grab the snow shovel and return to the house.

The very next morning, I keep my promise and walk along the Pelly River with Grey and from there into the forest. The dull winter light bathes the conifers in a spooky haze of gray. All around me, nature is exceptionally still. The fallen snow muffles my steps and I feel like I'm walking through a landscape from a dream. Grey bounces ahead, but not without turning to look at me from time to time.

After a few minutes, I realize how stupid the idea of going for a walk was. Everything here reminds me of the Quiet Lake area. The snow-powdered spruces, the white-gray winter sky, the biting cold. Inevitably, my mind wanders back to the day I discovered Lou. Despite the gloves, I bury my hands deep in my pockets. Back then, I didn't want to go on living like this anymore. Then again, I'm basically just as lonely today as I was a year ago. Certainly not quite like that now that I have Grey, but Grey is a wolf, not a human.

And yet…something's different from that winter at Quiet Lake and it's not because of the few people I've joined to shovel snow.

I try to be clear about my feelings.

For a while, I've been wondering if I regret the kidnapping. Of course, I didn't want to hurt Lou, but how could I regret everything else? I don't think anyone has ever experienced love like we have. In hindsight, it seems like a deep, unfathomable mystery to me. When I think of that love, there's the heaviness of my darkness that suddenly became so bright, like a thousand stars were rising at the same time. There are whispered words and wild magic, there is the smell of river water, wind, and night, and the many things we never said to each other. There is trust that grew in silence. And a lightness I don't understand. How am I supposed to regret a love like that when it grew out of something utterly wrong? How can something so beautiful arise from such a false beginning?

I involuntarily shake my head. I don't know the answer. All I know is that I'm different than I was then. Even today, weeks after Lou's departure, everything feels pointless. Still, I would never walk across a half-frozen lake with my eyes closed. Maybe it's only the pain of loss that makes me come alive. A year ago, I felt nothing but emptiness. I found myself again through Lou. This is perhaps the greatest gift she has given me.

I stop abruptly. My breath paints bright little clouds in the winter air. As always when I think of Lou, I am suddenly frightened. Good God, I hope she's okay. She should have found her way back to her life. It would be cruel if she couldn't get over the trauma I caused.

Just be okay, Lou, yes? For a moment, I stop and listen, as if she must answer me, but everything remains still. Naturally.

I start moving again. My snow pants rustle with every step and the snow crunches under my soles. My walk is still too sluggish. When you miss someone, it's like being sick. I wonder if it will ever stop. Will this longing in my chest ever fade? Will I ever be able to remember Lou and feel nothing but joy and gratitude? I still can't imagine it. Nor can I imagine life without her. A life without Lou…

I should be searching for a job. Every person needs a task so as not to go crazy whether they have money or not. In the wilderness,

I've been busy trapping, hunting, collecting wood, canning fruit, and making fruit wine, but what if I can never go back there? What if the memory of Lou remains painful?

So, what should I do in Faro? And what happens if I get flashes again? Will I have to move on, from village to village, always on the run from my seizures and their effects? Will people's fear make me a perpetual nomad? And what am I supposed to do with this life without Lou? Lou wanted a normal life with me and I told her that wasn't possible because even if I currently don't have flashes, that can change at any time.

A load of snow falls on my hat from above. Confused, I take off the lined glove and tap off the powder, but some of it sticks to the wool in icy clumps. Did I stop again? I look around. Grey stands next to me and licks my fingers. I automatically squat down and wrap my arms around him. His tongue roughly washes my cheek.

"She was right," I murmur into the thick, soft fur around his neck, burying my nose deeper into it. Grey howls like he's adding music to my grief. Again, I smile and cry at the same time. *Crazy*. Lou told me no love in the world could heal me. I think it's only now that I understand what she meant. I have the boy's experiences, but too much has broken inside me. No, love alone won't heal me. I can only do that myself.

Carefully, I detach myself from Grey and stand. Lou would have wanted me to take care of myself, so I'll do what I should have done a long time ago.

CHAPTER 34

Dr. India Lee, Psychotherapist, is written in dark green letters on the antique sign next to the door. She's the only psychologist within a hundred miles and I'm lucky her office is four blocks from me. I knock the snow off my winter boots and ring the bell.

Not a second later, the door swings open. "I saw you coming." The woman in front of me is no taller than my belly button. For her to have seen me coming, she must have been standing on a chair by the window. Calmly, she stretches out her hand to me, very far up. "I'm Dr. Lee."

I awkwardly grab her fingers and shake them. "Brendan Connor." She has a firm handshake, which I didn't expect given her size.

She smiles as she invites me in, and with a sinking feeling, I follow her into a lime-green-painted room. By the window is a desk with a chaotic hodgepodge of documents with several chairs spread out in front of it and there is a flowered couch in the corner. On the table in front of the sofa are two glasses and a carafe of water, and an incense stick on the windowsill exudes an earthy smell. Cedar.

"Sit wherever you feel comfortable."

I eye India Lee with a mixture of suspicion and nervousness. She is different from Dr. Watts. Dr. Watts looked like a typical doctor, Dr. Lee, in her wide orange trousers, lambskin slippers, colorful felt

jacket, and feather necklace, looks like an aging flower child. Her brown hair curls around round cheeks, and in a weird way, I like her.

I sit in the back corner of the room on the sofa. Without comment, Dr. Lee sinks into her desk chair and turns to me.

"Did you leave your wolf at home?"

I must seem puzzled because she's laughing.

"It's a small town, Mr. Connor. Strangers attract attention."

I bet India Lee also stands out in Faro. That makes her even more likable to me. "I barely left the house."

She is silent for a moment, studying me carefully. "Is that why you're here?"

"No. Perhaps…I don't know." I slump my shoulders, discouraged. I didn't say much to her on the phone. Suddenly, it all seems wrong to me. How do I dare tell a total stranger my story? Have I gone insane? "I should leave…"

"Back to your house, to your wolf?"

Back to solitude? She doesn't say that, but she suspects it, I can tell by the penetrating look she gives me. I was shocked when I peered into the mirror this morning. My cheeks are sunken, eyes dull, skin sallow, almost gray—like Delsin. If I leave now, nothing will change. However, Lou would have liked it, that's the only reason I'm sitting here.

"Call me Brendan," I reply, licking dry lips.

"Okay, Brendan. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

"You're bound by confidentiality," I state.

She nods without changing her expression.

"You don't go to the police if your patients tell you things that… made them criminals."

Relaxed, India Lee folds her hands on her lap. I immediately notice how tense I am sitting on the corner sofa and breathe deeply into my stomach. Like in a fight. I don't even know why confidentiality is so important to me. A few weeks ago, I wouldn't have given a damn, but now I want to be free. I have to take care of Grey.

"I'll lose my license if I make public what my patients tell me," Dr. Lee explains kindly. "Unless you tell me you plan to murder your

neighbor, I would have to report that to the police. Imminent danger."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "I don't mind old Mrs. Campbell," I try to joke.

India Lee smiles. "What do you want to start with, Brendan?"

I'm glad she's letting me decide.

"I've had… I have flashbacks… But I'm not sure if they're actually flashbacks." I've since googled the phenomenon. "They last longer than a few seconds. Sometimes even hours, and they don't start abruptly either, instead, I feel myself drifting off."

"So, you've come to see me because you're suffering from something you cannot explain."

I nod. I clarified the issue of payment with her on the phone. I pay for the sessions privately. I don't have health insurance anyway.

"Can you describe the drifting off?" Dr. Lee inquires.

I deliberate briefly. "I fall into a dark room. It's like a trapdoor opening in the ground. Before that, I see everything in black and white and everything seems distorted."

Dr. Lee jots something down, then looks at me invitingly.

"I have no recollection of what I'm doing during that time. I was told"—*Lou told me*—"I was talking about a lot of what I experienced. There were…bad things happened during my childhood." I'm not ready to reveal more just yet. "I also behave aggressively during these phases. I break things, injure people, but afterward, I don't remember any of it." I have to take a deep breath. I wish I could hastily leave the room.

"So, you don't remember what you do during these episodes. Do you remember anything else?"

"I always see a boy. The boy…well…I see him like he was in a movie…"

"Aha." Dr. Lee's eyes flash for a moment. "Tell me about the boy," she prompts. "Anything you can or want to tell me."

I tell her how I've approached the boy over the past few months, how I've talked to him and how I finally took him by the hand and led him into the light. I mention Lou, but not the kidnapping. Nor do

I mention the coffin or my stepfather. But I tell India Lee about my recovered memories.

When I finish, she tilts her head. She seems to be waiting for something.

"I'm the boy," I say like a student who owes the teacher an answer.

"Yes, certainly," she replies calmly as if what I'm telling her is the most normal thing in the world. "Why do you think this boy is here?"

"He shields me from memories. Painful memories. But also beautiful ones. And sad ones."

"So, he protected you." Lee gets up, walks to a waist-high bookshelf, and pulls out a red tome. She sets it on the table, leaving it closed.

"Without knowing your childhood, Brendan…you said bad things happened. How old were you?"

"Young. I don't know exactly." For a millisecond, the image of the three candles flashes through my mind. "Maybe four."

"That would fit."

I don't understand anything anymore.

She leafs through the thick book on her desk and finally finds what she was looking for. She taps a heading with her ringed index finger.

"Have you ever heard of dissociative disorders?" India Lee looks at me with interest. Her honey-colored eyes catch my eye for the first time. Unlike Dr. Watts, she has a kind expression. Still uncomfortable, I shake my head. I never expected to get an explanation for this strange phenomenon so quickly.

"I'm not saying you suffer from it, but you should know what these disorders can do."

I nod uneasily.

Dr. Lee sits down in her chair. "Dissociative disorders can occur in the context of trauma, similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. Do you know what PTSD is?"

"Yes." Dr. Watts explained it in the first and last session. Post-traumatic stress disorders are long-term effects of trauma. "Flashbacks are part of it," is all I say.

“Among other things.” India Lee gives me a brief explanation of how the brain reacts to a traumatic event. However, I can only remember that some things are stored unfiltered during this time and often fail to reach consciousness. Thus, traumatic memories would often be bizarre and details would be augmented in the memory.

“After a trauma, the psyche ensures that you can survive. Sometimes, this requires disassociating feelings, but also memories. A traumatized child living in a family situation they cannot escape from, where the trauma may be repeated over and over again, must sever a large part of themselves in order to remain viable. Push away. Deny. Disassociate. All these things are available to a child.”

“So, what happened to me?” I ask, staring at the long ash stem of the incense stick.

India Lee rolls her chair over to the table and pours me a glass of water. “I don’t even know you yet, Brendan. When you say bad things happened in your childhood, the first thing to think about is a reaction to those things. The seizures you describe to me, especially the amnesia and flashback-like episodes, can indicate a dissociative disorder. It often develops in young children who are traumatized because they are not yet familiar with other coping strategies.”

The ash from the incense stick falls into the cobalt-blue drip tray. “What exactly are these disturbances?”

“I’ll make you a copy of that chapter in my book later. In the worst case, a person splits their consciousness into several parts. It used to be called multiple personality disorder.”

I think of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. My heart beats faster. “So, I’m schizophrenic?”

“No, that’s something else entirely, Brendan. Schizophrenia is a mental illness that is not caused by trauma. I also do not believe you suffer from classic DID. Then you would have to have lapses and amnesia in everyday life without these attacks.”

I do not understand anything. “What exactly is DID?”

“DID is dissociative identity disorder. Such patients jump back and forth between their personalities in everyday life without realizing it. It goes so far that one personality buys things that the

other doesn't know anything about afterward, for example. Do you recognize something like that about yourself?"

"No."

"There are a number of mixed and sub-types, including mixed forms with other post-traumatic stress disorders. I suspect that you disconnected your consciousness during a stressful situation. You created a boy who was older than you at the time. Your subconscious thought your older self, an older Brendan, could handle it better. This is how you survived the situation. The boy shouldered most of your grief, but you also gave him fond memories that weighed on you."

"Why should happy memories bother me?"

"They increase sadness."

The incense stick burns up. The scent of cedar hangs in the air. I rub my pants with damp hands. I'm completely confused.

Dr. Lee rolls her desk chair a bit toward me. "That was a lot. Do you need a break?"

I hastily shake my head. "No, I just don't understand."

"If you had actually developed your own sub-personality, you would not have been able to access it. It often takes years before people with DID succeed in integrating or dissolving the different parts. Many never even succeed. It requires a lot of patience and self-acceptance."

My head is spinning. So, I'm not completely crazy, just half crazy?

"The walls to the boy were thin, you knew about him. Although he was separate or suppressed, he did not become independent."

I stare at her and don't know what to think of all this anymore.

"You've already taken the first step and brought him back."

I drink the whole glass of water in one gulp because I feel like it might clear my mind.

India Lee leans forward. "Why are you here, Brendan?"

"I want to know what I have. It would be…helpful…" I hesitate and look at her questioningly. "Less scary."

"A shot in the dark, without guarantee. Would that be okay with you?"

I nod.

"You are triggered, you get a flashback that doesn't necessarily paralyze your entire thinking, maybe only lasting a few seconds. Possibly several in a row with clear intervals in between, hence the feeling of slowly slipping away. But during these flashbacks, your body, or rather your subconscious, mobilizes the best possible protection for you. This is where the dissociative disorder sets in, with which you beam yourself away from reality completely because during the flashback, you do not realize the difference between past and present. Your subconscious thinks you are back in the old situation. I can't tell you yet what exactly happens in this phase. Maybe you're going through some kind of dissociative trance." She gives me a piercing look. "What are you hoping to get out of therapy, Brendan?"

"I want these fits to stop," I answer truthfully. "Or stay in control during them."

India Lee nods. "Okay, that's a good goal. However, you will need a lot of patience."

I wake up from a scream. Darkness hangs like a shroud in the air, in which the cry for help still reverberates. Sweat runs down my back.

"Grey?" I grope around disoriented, but only find the soft sleeping mat and the cool floor. Usually, Grey lies next to me, huddling against me when, once again, I am startled awake by my own scream of terror. But now he's gone. Stiffly, I stand. I still can't see anything but darkness.

I force myself to take a few steps forward, arms outstretched like a blind man. Something is not right.

"Grey?"

The south window should be over there, but there is nothing. No cutout in the walls, no glass, no stars. Nothing at all. Only blackness. My heart is beating wildly against my ribs. I had a nightmare, now what? I blink hard, but it stays dark like in the realm of the dead. I dare not breathe. The strange fear that someone might hear me sends an icy shiver down my spine. But who could hear me other than Grey?

I grope around again. My fingertips touch rough, cold wood. Very close in front of me. To my sides, left and right. They're walls. *No, impossible!*

"Grey?"

A rough scraping whispers through the air, metal clicks. One, two, three, four, five, six.

My blood freezes to a lump of ice. Top and bottom blur. He found me. The monster found me. It killed Grey and put me in a coffin. Nobody will ever find me. Nobody knows where I am. My throat constricts. The suffocating air makes my eyes water. I wildly push against the wood, but it won't budge. The narrowness crushes me like a hand crushes ripe fruit. I can't breathe anymore. Again, I press against the lid. Suddenly, it breaks and I lie in a fresh grave. There is earth everywhere, heavy and damp, full of worms and bugs. They go into my mouth, into my lungs…

I wake with a start and hear myself screaming.

Grey is with me immediately, lying by my side as if guarding me. Drenched in sweat, I bury my fingers in his fur and, gasping, stare at the south window. The full moon is silver and large in the sky, casting a brilliant ray of light on the old parquet floor.

Only *a dream. It was only a dream, Brendan*.

I focus on my breath like Dr. India Lee advised me. Slowly in through the nose, evenly out through the mouth. Just a few breaths per minute to slow the heartbeat. She prepared me for the nightmares.

The more memories we look at together, the more they'll accompany you in your dreams, she said.

Restless, I get up and run water over my face in the kitchen. Now the dark dreams haunt me every night. I go to India Lee twice a week, but we don't always work to integrate the bad memories. They have to be gradually sorted and evaluated in my life story, and eventually, I should be able to consciously control these memories so that they don't flood me upon a trigger. India Lee warned me about new seizures. *They're re-traumatizing you, Brendan. You relive*

your childhood trauma over and over again and that keeps throwing you back.

But it's difficult to find words for things that left me speechless from the horror. How do you remember without those memories ruining you? Many of my impressions are patchy even now, but examining them is essential for healing. I told Dr. India Lee about some of the beatings, the chains, and the loneliness, but there is still a lot she doesn't know.

And I am realizing more and more how much of what happened on Thorson Ave. has been emotionally repressed by me. In the dreams, I often get close to my true feelings, undergoing the moments in the coffin with full intensity. The boy once said I only knew the echo of the pain, and he was right.

Despite the slow progress or maybe because of it, I can't stop thinking about Lou. I often find myself picking up my phone to look at her pictures. Then, one day, I mindlessly erase them from my cell phone and laptop so as not to be tempted any longer. After that, I smash the smartphone against the wall because I'm so angry with myself.

In mid-November, I begin drawing again. I paint Lou as I remember her and use it to paper the living room. Lou under the pines, afraid and shy. Lou in the RV, staring straight ahead without really seeing anything. Lou and her first smile in the Yukon while feeding Grey. Lou at the lake washing clothes, Lou under the willow tree, wringing her hands and looking stunned. *Do you know now?* Lou naked in the sand, half-covered by another body.

I take these pictures with me to the therapy session along with my dark drawings, the rose tendrils on ebony. I need these pictures to be able to tell India Lee what happened. Back on Thorson Ave. and this year at Lodgepole. My voice breaks a few times and I keep repeating things, but India Lee listens patiently without interrupting. Every now and then, she sips her tea as if the story she's hearing is one of many. Only when I mention the coffin and later the chloroform, does she take a deep breath, a sign of her dismay.

Finally, I'm finished and stare at a bright area on the lime-green wall where a picture may have once hung.

“So you let the girl you kidnapped go,” India Lee sums up the last part of my story.

I only nod and cautiously look at her. If she’s shocked, she doesn’t show it, she shows nothing at all.

“I’m not here to judge you, Brendan,” she says, folding her hands back on her lap. Her eyes are clear and open. “Trauma can lead to bad deeds. You came to me so I could help you.”

“Am I like my stepfather?” The question comes out of my mouth so unexpectedly that I’m surprised myself.

“You already answered that earlier, didn’t you? You had to flee to gain your freedom, but you let the girl go.”

I ponder her words for a moment. “Why did he do it? I mean, holding me captive and locked in a coffin?” Sometimes I think I could take it better if I knew the *why*.

India Lee shrugs. “One can only speculate. In the end, most likely he wouldn’t have been able to explain it, either.” She rolls the chair closer to me again. “Believe me, Brendan, too many people often don’t understand their own actions. And even if their lives were on the line, they might not be able to explain in a comprehensible way why they did this or that. During the process of humanization, from being purely human to humanity, an awful lot of things went wrong for such people. Not all people behave humanely. You, Brendan, are lucky to have been with your mother for at least the first three years, regardless of why you were separated from her. The first three years shape us significantly. You learned what love means from your mother. Others may have just forgotten it over the years like a language they haven’t spoken in a while. The girl helped you speak it fluently again. And that’s the difference between this winter and last winter.” I still see no judgment in her eyes. “You have something now that you didn’t have then.”

I look at her expectantly.

“You don’t know?” She smiles. “Hope.”

CHAPTER 35

Six weeks later

The unassuming film studio in Echo Park, Los Angeles, is past its prime. Stucco is crumbling from the graying facade and a few broken roof tiles lie like flotsam next to the entrance. I park the RV in front and pause for a moment, my hands gripping the steering wheel.

Hope. Right now, I have to think of India Lee. So much has happened since then. Still, I can't believe I'm back in my old city. Los Angeles still feels like a hurricane that sweeps my thoughts out of my head. I find it difficult to concentrate.

Last night, I stood in a Walmart parking lot and tried to distance myself. Take a step back from the last few weeks. Since the day on the *Mountain of Everything*, where I shooed away a grizzly and saved a family, things have been happening too fast. Crowds of too many people and too many questions overwhelm me. Sometimes, I feel like I'm a baby bird whose shell was forcefully broken open before its time. I am not prepared for the hype surrounding myself. Besides, what I did was only natural. Three brutal screams—and the bear released the man and chased me instead. I was able to pull myself up a birch tree and get to safety. I know from experience that adult grizzlies rarely climb trees. There was nothing particularly

heroic about it. The real hero was Grey since he guarded the family and made sure the grizzly didn't return.

In Faro, however, the looks I've been getting since then have changed. Old Mrs. Campbell even brought me a pot of elk goulash with chestnuts and juniper berries even though she never paid me any attention before. I don't even know if she knew I moved in next to her. Like me, she seems to lead a hermit's life. A few First Nations women blatantly eyed me as I walked toward the woods with Grey. Sometimes, they put their heads together and giggled. I was also asked to stroke a child's hair as if my touch would bring good fortune. Mr. Miller, the young father who I carried back to Faro after the bear attack, gave me a food basket. Maybe he heard that nobody ever saw me in the supermarket. Between the canned ham and a bag of marshmallows was a thank-you note, saying he'd signed me up for *Hero of the Week*. The invitation from the film company, *Echo Park Studio*, was right next to the air-dried salami. After reading it, I regretted for the first time that I saved the guy and dragged him miles through the snow.

I take a deep breath while studying the film studio from outside. There's only one reason I'm in Los Angeles today. Hope. If Lou continues to watch the show, this is my chance to reach her. After everything I've done, showing up in Ash Springs would be completely out of the question. If she realized that her love was merely an illusion, I don't want to open old wounds by showing up. But, if she didn't, if there is a smidgeon of a chance… I close my eyes. Like in a flash, I suddenly smell smoke, needles, and wet sand, feel Lou's sweet lips on mine, taste her tongue—salt, raspberries, and peppermint. Raindrops tickle my back. The longing is like a storm in my heart, a tornado in my head. The bittersweet desire pulses through my veins like blood. A constant stream in a single rhythm: Lou. Lou. Lou. Bright and dark. Endless.

Weeks ago, I wondered if the pain of loss would ever go away. Now I have the impression it will steadily worsen. Whoever said time could heal all wounds was lying.

With a sigh, I get out and walk toward the dilapidated building complex. I have to think of that Andrew guy, the Harvard douche I

used to be jealous of. Was that episode filmed here? Will Lou watch it with her brothers tonight?

Like the entrance to the parking lot, the entrance area is monitored by two security guards. I show them the invitation and my ID; my real ID, the predecessor of which Ramon had stolen from Thorson Ave. and given back to me then, to give me my name and birthday. The guards let me in and I am immediately greeted by a stylish young woman.

Penelope Grace, Intern, the oval tag pinned to her black blouse states.

"Brendan Connor?" Her perfectly plucked eyebrows are raised.

I nod mechanically, feeling completely disheveled in her presence.

"Welcome." I want to say *thank you*, but she keeps speaking. "You're late. You need to get into makeup right away." She gestures down a brightly lit, bare hallway. No word on me being a hero of the week, but I'm fine with that.

I hurry after her, trying to ignore the glare of the overhead lights and the crowd of busy people hurrying past me with urgent expressions on their faces. It's been two weeks since my last flash, triggered again by a particularly intense nightmare. India Lee suggested that even though the nightmares might still linger, the seizures would become weaker and shorter as I work through the repressed feelings, the despair, the fear, and the grief. It's *conceivable*, she said, *that dreams will never go away completely*.

I shade my eyes to avoid the light and orient myself by the clicking of Penelope's high heels. I can handle the nightmares as long as I can get the flashes under control. I'm making some progress, but I'll need perseverance. A lot of perseverance and a lot of time, maybe more than I have.

Other guests are already sitting in makeup. I have no idea if other shows are being filmed at the same time. I slump resignedly into the chair Penelope Grace directs me to.

"Mr. Connor?" A second young woman appears behind me. I see her in the mirror, but I don't turn to her because the hustle and bustle in the studio is definitely too hectic for me.

"I'm London McLane." For a moment, I only notice the black and white checks on her blouse, then the black leather pants and black hair. My mouth is getting dry. I turn to her abruptly, noticing the bright red bracelet. Red. The bracelet is red. Luckily, not a harbinger of a seizure.

I nod to her cautiously. "Hi."

She narrows her eyes and looks at me as if I'm not the hero of the week but the imposition of the century. "It seems we have lots of work to do," she says with a reserved smile. "When was the last time you cut your hair?"

I shrug and turn so I only have to see her through the mirror. "I don't know, but leave it the way it is." Lou likes it that way!

"A little shorter would be more serious."

"It stays like this."

"What about your…clothes?" She tugs at my faded black hoodie with her fingertips as if lice might crawl out of it at any second.

I glance at the brown cargo pants and see a ripped seam from a pocket. "I'm wearing these." I want Lou to see me exactly as she remembers me. Under no circumstances do I want to mutate into a second Andrew.

London McLane briefly disappears. I'm guessing she's talking to the production manager and they're considering if my attire could jeopardize the viewing of the show. When she comes back, she makes a vague gesture. "You'll be announced as a hermit from the Yukon," she states simply. Apparently, that's enough explanation for my appearance.

I don't respond and resign myself to the various tinctures, creams, and brushes. I want to tune out everything and go back to the night under the willow tree, however, other people keep coming in to greet me, congratulate me, or shout instructions to the makeup artists.

Eventually, I'm done and I look at myself in the mirror. The deep shadows under my eyes are hidden by a thick layer of makeup that sticks to my skin like glue. My hollow cheeks appear fuller. I feel strange, this healthy-looking young man in front of me looks like a happier version of myself.

Maybe that would be me if Thorson Ave. had never existed.

Minutes later, I'm standing in front of the recording room where the show is being filmed. My palms are damp and my heart is beating way too fast. I better not get a flash now. The show will be broadcasted live, today, December 24th, when all the families are gathered in front of their TVs. My case of rescuing the family man seemed to fit perfectly with the Christmas holidays. That's probably one of the reasons they picked me for week 52.

I can hear the dramatic title melody coming from the studio. A picture of Lou pops up before me, sitting on the RV bench with her knees drawn up, watching *Hero of the Week*. How small she always made herself in the beginning…

"Brendan? Hello?" London taps my face with the powder puff for the hundredth time. "You're on next."

As if from afar, I hear the voice of the anchor, David O'Dell.

"Today's hero of the week comes from lonely Canada, more precisely, the Yukon Territory."

I close my eyes and send a prayer to heaven that Lou is sitting in front of the television with her brothers today. Is she thinking of me? How does she feel when she sees pictures of the snowy Yukon? Does she remember our night under the willow tree, our kisses, and the smell of the forest?

"Brendan?" London McLane clicks her tongue impatiently.

I shake my head in confusion and hear the closing words, which are also my cue: "At just twenty-two years old, he has already saved five lives. Let's give a hand to Brendan Connor."

Applause rings out from the recording room and pounds in my ears. I feel like I'm underwater, everything blurs. London opens the door and slaps me on the shoulder to make me run. I stumble clumsily and catch myself just in time to enter the studio.

At first, the light is so bright that I can't see anything at all. Bright stars dance before my eyes, in between a dark dot, probably David O'Dell. I fixate on the dot and try to pay attention to what the moderator says. I know his text because it was shown to me before

the broadcast, plus, I also know all the questions he will ask me. It is mainly about the situation during the bear attack. I glance down to collect myself. The sentences fly by me and circle in the air. The spotlights burn the top of my head.

At some point, the room grows quiet.

Answer!

I clear my throat awkwardly, then rattle off the first of my memorized answers, not knowing if it's okay.

Silence again.

Even louder applause.

Jordan Price rises from my thoughts as if from a tomb, and all of a sudden, it all seems so grotesque to me. They're celebrating me here as a hero of the week, yet I killed a man and kidnapped a girl.

But you let Lou go. And Jordan knew what he was himself getting into…

Even as my inner voices argue, David O'Dell keeps talking. My throat tightens with every answer I give. Sweat collects on my forehead. The heat from the lights is unbearable. Again and again, I glance at the floor because the light burns my eyes.

I'm about to freak out.

You need a stimulus. Something that keeps you in the here and now.

However, I don't have any ice cubes to suck on—a tip Dr. Lee gave me for when I feel like I'm drifting. Ice cubes or chili peppers. I bite my cheek hard. A second later, I taste copper.

David O'Dell's face becomes more defined.

"And, Brendan," I hear him say, "among the many heroes of the week, do you have a personal favorite who should end up being *Hero of the Year*?"

I swallow. I didn't need to memorize this answer. "Not a hero, but a heroine," I reply softly. "Though she was never on this show, she saved my life." Despite the brightness, I look straight into the camera and pray Lou is watching.

"A hero who was saved himself? Sounds exciting." David O'Dell laughs. "Who exactly is this heroine?"

I still don’t look away, imagining peering through the camera right into Lou’s northern-sky-blue eyes. A warm feeling of gratitude flows into my heart. I have to stop for a moment. So many memories wash over me, only bright, light memories this time. I have to pull myself together so I don’t cry. She gave me so many things. Much more than love and hope, but also wonderful moments. They are bringers of light in my darkness.

“It’s a girl from Nevada,” I finally say softly as if only she should hear. “She proved to me that I’m not as bad as I used to think. She believed in me when I couldn’t anymore.” I clear my throat briefly because I’m saying a lot more than I wanted to, but I can’t hold back the words. “She shone rays of sunshine into my darkness and showed me that gray is merely silver that doesn’t shine. For that…” I pause, blink. “I’d like to thank her today, that’s why I’m here.” My surroundings blur a second time that evening, but not because I feel unreal. I press my hands against my temples briefly to collect myself. This is too important. This is my hope, my chance. “This girl…” *Too quiet*, I start again. “This girl wanted me to make her a promise before we went our separate ways.” I swallow again and it hurts because my throat is burning. “I didn’t know if I could keep it, so today… I want her to know that I’m in therapy…and…and that I will wait for her if she’s willing to give me another chance.” When I finish, I’m out of breath and my hoodie is stuck to my back. My eyes are damp, but I don’t care. Applause follows again and I use the moment to take a deep breath into my stomach. Just like during a fight.

Later that day, I walk through the neighborhood of my youth with my hood pulled up. The sky is pitch black and cloudy, not a star can be seen.

I leave the vapid rows of houses and the silhouette of the silvery skyscrapers behind, walk along the concrete Los Angeles River, and at some point, cross the decommissioned railroad tracks toward Compton. A dog barks in the distance and a few drunks down the street sing “Jingle Bells.” At the shabby corner kiosk, an elderly

woman is rummaging through the garbage can. On impulse, I hand her a hundred-dollar bill even though I know half of it will probably be spent on crack.

I feel strange, but can't describe in what way. I think of Lou and imagine how she may have reacted to my performance. In my imagination, she is sitting in her room, which is undeniably painted yellow and pink, clutching a heart pillow to her chest, her blue eyes full of tears. That's nonsense, of course, she probably doesn't even have a heart pillow. Besides, I shouldn't picture Lou like that as if I know everything about her.

I banish these images from my mind as I walk on.

At some point, the asphalt gives way to gray gravel. The poor neighborhood still appears deserted, but in the last house on the left side of Thorson Ave, many windows are brightly lit. A colorful strand of lights stretches below the roof along the gutter. Next to one of the royal palms in the front yard, is a brightly blinking reindeer with a Santa Claus sleigh.

Like last time, my heart starts beating at the sight of my former home. A few months ago, this environment seemed foreign, now it reminds me more of a treasure. Something utterly precious.

I stop right in front of the waist-high gate. Two cherry-red pillar candles burn on tall candlesticks behind one of the windows. The others are transformed into glowing squares by strands of lights. A wreath of fir branches hangs on the front door, decorated with red-and-white candy canes. I stare at the window on the right. The curtains with the fire engines are drawn and the teddy bear mobile hovers silently in the air as if it were sleeping. The little boy must be in bed. He's probably dreaming of tomorrow and the presents that will be under the Christmas tree.

For a moment, I stand there and stare at the light blue bears.

Father, mother, child.

I close my eyes. My heart grows warm. I still wish for that, just in a different way. There are so many things I want to do better than my parents. If I had a son or daughter, I could do those things right that my mom and dad did wrong. I feel it's my duty—funny. India Lee is probably right. Some things can never be explained properly.

For a while, I stand still, with nothing but longing and hope in my heart. A classical version of “Silent Night” emerges from the house.

Somehow, I’m glad that such a loving family lives in this house of all places. It is said that some places, after horrible events, hold on to those emotions for a long time—like a brand. Many people say they can feel the negative atmosphere. Here, however, at the end of Thorson Ave, I feel absolutely nothing of the past. No anger and no hate. At least not today. The little boy who was trapped in the basement here is free.

CHAPTER 36

She won't come, I'm quite sure.

In nervous excitement, I walk across the parking lot of the Lodgepole Visitor Center with Grey on a leash. Back and forth, back and forth. Like a million times. The sound of my footsteps on the asphalt seems to me like the ticking of a clock running down fast. But despite my doubts, I can't take my eyes off the only access road.

A number of vacationers have arrived during the day, families with large RVs, vacationers with backpacks and tents, lonely hikers. Just no Lou.

The air is now laced with the chill of the approaching evening and the sky is covered with a layer of gray, ragged clouds. Only in the west, does a narrow rust-red stripe stretch across the tall trees.

I anxiously glance at the clock. Shortly after five. The days are gradually growing shorter.

The dull feeling inside me steadily intensifies and becomes an iron-hard chunk. Lou would have to be completely insane to show up. That would be sick. By now she must have realized that she never really loved me. She might even have a boyfriend in Ash Springs. A red veil descends over my mind at the thought of another touching her. I gag.

No! No! No! She has no boyfriend. Lou loves me.

What if she doesn't? my heart counters.

Always the same questions, for weeks.

I throw away the cigarette butt, stop, and grip the leash tighter.

If she doesn't, then what will I do? Should I go back to Faro and finish my therapy as Dr. Lee suggested?

We still haven't fully grasped the extent of your condition. Maybe there's another split part, I hear her say. *There is a lot of anger in you. Anger that you were not allowed to work out at the time.*

I vented during fights.

Your adult self vented. The boy was not allowed to express his anger. He had to put up with everything. Where is his anger, his rage? Can you feel it? Hating his stepfather must be killing him.

For a moment, I think about the red mist, the voice: *Move aside!* I have heard these words many times during a seizure. Was that the little boy or was that my suppressed anger?

Are you now able to pronounce your stepfather's name?

Everett Harlow Nolan, I said, my voice firm but guarded.

Good. Do you sometimes feel the need to seek revenge on Everett Nolan?

I don't know. But, yes…yes. But that's not sick.

Of course not. That's normal.

Listen, I have the seizures under control. I haven't broken anything during an attack in a long time. I even dared to order new furniture.

And yet, after the seizures, fragments of your memory are still missing. This could be an indication of another split side. You're not healthy, Brendan.

I may never be, Dr. Lee. You even said so yourself. But if there's a chance for me to live with Lou, I have to take it!

To put it mildly, I don't think that's a good idea. A normal life, yes—but not with this girl.

With this girl…

Yes, with Lou, the girl you kidnapped. She triggers you. Do you truly believe you can start a normal life with her after everything that happened? What will Lou's brothers say about your union? Aren't you afraid that if Ethan finds out what really happened back then, he will press charges?? From what you've told me, I can't

imagine he would welcome you—should Louisa actually show up at the meeting place.

I tilt my head back and look up at the pewter sky. More and more clouds swell over the tops of the dark redwoods.

Will you come, Lou?

A whisper runs through the canopy of the trees almost like an answer—but the murmur could mean either *yes* or *no*. *If she wanted to come, she'd certainly be here by now*, I answer myself. Sadness burns in my chest. Yes, she would already be here, I should stop fooling myself.

With heavy steps, I walk around the visitor center to the back entrance. Grey slinks beside me like a beaten dog. I snapped at him a couple of times today for no reason, and even after I scratched his ears, he still feels the chaos inside me.

I tie him to a stainless steel railing at the back entrance and stupidly think about Lou's imaginary pink rhino she told me about. She always tied it to the porch. I think it was Liam who invented that game for her.

I shake my head in disbelief at myself. Lou is everywhere, in my every thought, in every crevice of my brain. Now I can't even tie up a wolf without her coming to mind.

With an inward sigh, I enter the visitor center, go to the restroom, and fill an old plastic bowl with water so Grey can have something to drink. Since long-term parking is a no-go here, I parked the motorhome outside the center yesterday and left it there this morning. Since then, I haven't dared go back to the RV, fearing I'd miss Lou. So Grey and I had to fast because I foolishly left my money in the motorhome, or otherwise, I would have treated Grey to an XL can of dog food from the visitor center.

I take the bowl outside and Grey eagerly drinks while I walk back into the visitor center and survey the parking lot from there. It now seems dead. There are only three vans and a small car in the large parking area. A crow hops over the curb and picks up some crumbs next to a garbage can. Wind sweeps across the trash, grabs a bag of French fries, and spins it past the window. *Sam's Best French Fries*.

Anxiously, I watch the area.

Still no Lou.

In the distance, I spot the sequoia I hid behind a year ago as I surveyed the parking lot. Like a hunter. Like a madman. A year ago, Lou was in my RV, drugged and tied with a zip tie. A year ago, I forcefully fed her water and put her in the box.

She won't come. Suddenly, the suspicion turns to certainty. India Lee is right. How could we be happy together after what I did to her? Such things cannot simply be forgotten or fixed with explanations. Deep inside Lou, there will be a wound where all the fear and pain I have caused her accumulates. When the time comes, the injury will bleed and spill out like poison. Maybe that has already happened and she only feels contempt for me.

The gray area blurs before my eyes. Did I honestly expect she'd come? Granted, it was her suggestion—but she was confused and weak at the time. I shouldn't have taken her words seriously. But then that's exactly what I wanted, especially when I started to feel better thanks to the therapy.

Standing at the window of the visitor center, I clench my fists and press my lips together. I don't want to cry now.

Furtively, I wipe my eyes with my sleeve.

Even if you don't come… I love you, Lou! I love you, Lou, and nothing else. And I'm so sorry for everything I've done. For everything, everything, everything…except for my love for you.

I breathe through my mouth. Breathe like Dr. Lee showed me. Maybe I should just go and save myself the agony of the pointless wait. But something in me resists.

Eventually, I return to the back exit to go to the parking lot with Grey.

Even before I step outside, my gaze falls on the empty space on the railing. I rip open the door and a blast of cool air whooshes over me.

"Damn! What the fuck!" I bang on the steel post in rage. A woman who has just emerged from the shower room wrapped only in a towel looks at me wide-eyed and hurries around the corner.

"Grey?" I yell, and at the same time, start running in the direction of the forest that begins behind the visitor center. "You

come back immediately! You hear me?"

It's just not possible! I stop in front of the first row of trees and look around. It's impossible to get a full view of the parking lot from where I'm standing, but I can guess where he's gone.

"Yeah, okay, I didn't give you any food," I call out angrily, stepping over some bushes. Light falls in individual stripes on the shady forest floor. "But that's no reason to run away and go hunting!"

It's my fault. I was preoccupied and probably tied him up half-heartedly. I walk about half a mile between the sequoias before stopping again. "Grey, dammit! Come here or I'll make wolf roast out of you when I catch you!"

A reproachful yelp answers me and I turn to see Grey standing beside a hawthorn, tail tucked, ears drooping. He looks at me guiltily from honey-colored eyes.

"There you are…" I snap, half angry, half mollified. "What if Lou shows up right now, huh?"

Grey pricks up his ears as he always does when Lou's name is mentioned.

"But she's not coming," I admit to myself resignedly. "She's not coming because I've been a complete lunatic. A brute. A…oh, hell…" Angry at myself, I dig my nails into my palm. If only I had never kidnapped her. I wish I had taken her to the RV for a beer. If only I had written to her on Facebook. I wish I had…

It's too late, any chance I had is gone.

I stroke Grey's short summer coat, but he ignores me. For some unknown reason, he suddenly seems restless. Before I can get hold of the leash, he jumps away toward the visitor center.

"Hey!" I protest, diving after him. Like a baseball player going for the base, I dive directly to the front of the edge of the forest and catch the leash with three fingers. Grey whines.

"Shut up!" I hiss through my teeth. I know I'm only mad because Lou hasn't shown up. In essence, I'm not angry, just disappointed, sad. It's not Grey's fault that my world has shattered into a thousand pieces.

Wiping my eyes again, I trip over the concrete lip of the walkway that connects the shower rooms and the visitor center. Grey tugs at his leash like crazy, whining and barking, almost getting tangled up. At the closed glass door of the visitor center, he stands on his hind legs.

"What the…" I peer through the glass and fall silent.

A girl is standing in the camping gear alcove with her back toward me. My heart starts to beat wildly. That shiny, flaxen hair that reaches down to her narrow shoulders, that white blouse with the wide sleeves, that shy yet determined demeanor. The silent vulnerability she has exuded since I…well, since I met her here a year ago.

I rub my eyes and look up again, expecting her to be gone, but she's still there. Like drops, realization seeps into me.

Lou is here!

For several heartbeats, I can't breathe even though my chest grows larger than the sky.

Lou is here!

She came. I can't believe it.

Tears well up in my eyes, and without really knowing what I'm doing, I yank open the door to the visitor center. Grey starts running like crazy, impossible to stop. A man in an army-green cap jumps to the side just in time to avoid him. Someone screams.

I stand there stunned, watching Lou walk toward the exit.

"Hey, mister, you can't come in here with your wolf…"

I have no idea who said that. I have no idea what's going on. My head is full of wonderful, confused thoughts when I realize Lou still hasn't seen me.

"Lou! Lou…wait!"

She flinches at the sound of my voice.

"Call the wolf back…" The man at the cash register comes running around his counter.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry!" I yell at him, rushing after Grey.

At that moment, she turns around and Grey jumps up on her. *Don't!* I want to scream, but he knocks her down, whines and barks like a dog that has found his master again decades later. Lou

clutches his neck like a drowning woman. She laughs, giggles, and sobs at the same time. *Crazy*.

Eventually, she gently pushes Grey aside and sits up.

She looks at me without saying a word. Her eyes shimmer with tears. And yet there is also this magic, the mysterious dark blue sparkle that drove me insane that night by the lake. My heart clenches with longing, even with Lou so close.

"You came," I say softly as if loud words might wake me from my dream. She takes my outstretched hand and I pull her up to me. A big lump sits in my throat. Only now that she is standing in front of me do I realize how much I've missed her. Much more than my consciousness allowed me to believe. Infinitely more.

She gently squeezes my fingers. "What? Did you doubt it?" She tilts her head and looks at me challengingly, somewhat defiant, like the old, adventurous Lou.

It fills me with a strange wistfulness, but also makes me smile. "All day long."

Suddenly, her lips begin to tremble. "I thought *you* hadn't come," she blurts out and tugs at my arm frantically as if she needs to get her feelings out. "We broke down and a truck had overturned and there were these stupid oranges all over the road…" A dry sob breaks out of her.

Wait a minute…she thought *I* wouldn't show up? *Me?* I involuntarily laugh even though I feel like crying like I haven't in a long time. This girl is truly crazy. Maybe that's why she loves me.

"I arrived yesterday. I've been waiting here since this morning," I tell her, reaching for Grey's collar because the cashier shouted at me again. "I had Grey tied up outside, but earlier he broke loose and I had to catch him."

Lou looks at me with incredulous eyes and it's only now that I realize she was deadly serious. She honestly thought I was going to let her down. She believed I wouldn't come. Doesn't she know how much I still love her and that nothing on earth could stop me from being with her?

I reach out to touch her cheek as she wraps her arms around my waist like it was the most natural gesture.

"I never want to be apart from you again, Bren. Never again."

With an indefinable sound, I press her to me and bury my face in her blonde strands. "You don't have to anymore, Lou, I promise." I breathe in the scent of her hair. It no longer smells of fire, wood, and smoke, but also not of lemon. More like honey lavender. Or simply of Lou. My heart begins to pound, a sweet rush of adrenaline and happiness floods my senses. Carefully, I take Lou's head in my hands and stroke her cheek with my thumb.

We stare at each other. A silence connects us for a few seconds, during which questions remain silent. She is like magic. It's only Lou and me and nothing else. And when we kiss it seems to me that we never left the lake, the sand, and the willow. It's like back then. Lou's taste, her soft lips, her warm, cautiously probing tongue. My blood fills with heat and in my chest I feel this deep, rough drumming like the heartbeat of the earth. Hot and cold shivers run down my back. A sweet, wild desire that seems as natural to me as the eternal Yukon winter nights.

I don't know how long we cling to each other after our kiss. Also the words of the man behind the counter, threatening to call the rangers if we don't get out of the store with Grey right away, don't come through to me.

Lou has to tell me several times to bring me back to reality. She also tells me that Jayden is waiting in the parking lot.

"He drove you here?" I ask, aghast, as we walk hand in hand to the exit. I can't believe it. I actually thought Lou had come by bus.

"He said he won't let me go unless he has your cell phone number and the exact coordinates of the land you lease."

So, she must have told him the truth about me. "He'll get them, sure." I nod to her. If I were Jayden, I probably would have gotten into a fight that sent me to the hospital. Of course, I don't mention that. I recall Dr. Lee's words.

What will Lou's brothers say about your union? Aren't you afraid Ethan will press charges if he finds out what truly happened back then?

Did she tell Ethan everything? Certainly not because then he would have come along for sure to strangle me with his own hands.

Jayden is standing in the parking lot with his hips against an old Ford, eyeing me darkly. I look back deliberately open since I don't want to provoke a fight under any circumstances.

Without a hello, he coolly asks for the property details as if I wasn't his sister's kidnapper but some real estate agent whose premises he wants to inspect. The situation is bizarre. He writes everything down on a piece of paper including my cell phone number.

"You won't be able to reach us often," I say as he slips the small pad into his pocket. "There's rarely signal in the Yukon."

"Well, make sure it works once in a while," he replies dangerously calm.

He hugs Lou goodbye. Long, very long.

When does he think he will see her again? What did Lou tell him? Back in September, she said we should spend the summer together, but after that summer, she'll be eighteen and free to do whatever with her life. I think we both mean not just the next few months, but a lifetime. Maybe we can go to Faro, too, so I can continue my therapy. So Lou can get what she most desires. A normal life. It might work.

When Jayden breaks the hug, he stares at me with his chin jutting out. "If you hurt her again, I'll kill you," he says again with that stoic calm that harbors more danger than if he was yelling at me.

I nod and he gets in the car. I understand him only too well. Girls like Lou need protection.

With a smile, I take Lou's hand and call Grey, who is sniffing the Ford's rear tire. He immediately trots over to my side.

"He stayed with you," Lou says astonished, looking Grey up and down. I realize how long it has been since she last saw him. The last time he was a puppy.

I pat Grey on the back good-naturedly. In the spring, at first I also thought the day would come when he'd simply disappear into the forest and never come back. For a moment, I remember our showdown under the wide-open sky, in the endless forest, and on the banks of the stormy Pelly River. What would I have done without

him during all that time of waiting? I look gratefully from Grey to Lou. “We had a few rough fights before he figured out who was in charge,” I tell her.

Lou nods and scans the parking lot. The Ford just rolls onto the road. How is she feeling now?

“The RV is parked a bit off.” I point vaguely to the south. “I wasn’t allowed to park here all day.”

Lou smiles silently and together we walk hand in hand across the wide stretch of land. It is dusk and only the setting sun casts a few pale red rays on the ground, a shimmering golden interplay of light and shadow.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I’ve had the wrong idea in my head this past year. Lou forgave me. She still loves me. She loves me not because of the kidnapping, but in spite of it.

It is possible that many things in life can be put right again, even if at first it seems as if there is no hope.

Bad people can become better people.

Crying to laughter.

Shadow to light.

Gray to silver.

I look at Lou again. Just like a year ago, I could look at her all the time now. The wind grabs her blonde hair with its stormy fingers, twirls it, and inflates her blouse like a balloon. Laughing, she pushes the fabric back against her flat stomach.

I remember the teddy bear mobile, of the happy family on Thorson Ave.

Sometimes, a place of horror becomes a home again. And a boy who knows only darkness becomes someone who loves.

Did you like the story? Then please leave me a review on Amazon. Write a few words or simply press stars - the more the better :-) Thank you!

Louisa and Brendan's story continues!

Is their love truly real or does it stem from an illusion and Lou's loneliness during the kidnapping? Does this love have a chance or will it shatter in the face of reality?

Read the sequel:

- "Trapped: Between Sky and Wind"
- "Trapped: Where Dreams Take us"

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POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

In order not to leave the reader in the dark, I want to go into the *dissociative disorder* again here so that fewer questions remain unanswered. All of us experience a dissociative state from time to time. If you drive a car from point A to point B, and then don't remember exactly how you got there, you've mentally stepped away. To put it simply, one part of the consciousness was driving the car, while the other part was mentally everywhere and nowhere. In everyday life, we experience many such harmless dissociative states. From daydreaming to focusing heavily on one thing while blocking out everything else. However, the clinical picture of *dissociative disorder* has nothing to do with it.

With this condition, part of the consciousness splits off to a much greater extent than in everyday dissociative states. This dissociation can, but does not always, result in delusions and hallucinations. This latter degree of severity corresponds to the state of a psychosis, which occurs in schizophrenia—except schizophrenia is not present here.

Today, most psychiatrists and psychologists believe dissociation is intended to protect the self from traumatic memories.

Wikipedia says about dissociation et al. as follows: "The term dissociation in psychiatry refers to partial to complete disintegration

of normally coherent functions of perception, consciousness, memory, identity, and motor skills."

There are many different forms of dissociation and it is not the purpose of this postscript to deal with them all. If you want to find out more, there is no longer the need to buy expensive specialized books, but you can do research on the Internet. All forms are found here, from *dissociative amnesia* to the most severe form, *dissociative identity disorder*, formerly known as *multiple personality disorder*. Dr. Lee mentions them in this book since she initially assumes Brendan might suffer from it. You should know that this disorder only develops during childhood and often persists later on. Identity formation is in full swing in young children. When they experience trauma or a series of traumas, such as extreme physical or sexual abuse, they sometimes develop additional identities that endure this suffering for them. For the best possible protection, your true self is unaware of it, "at best" it doesn't know anything about the other parts of your personality. If you are interested, there are quite a few books on the subject.

Also worth mentioning are *depersonalization* and *derealization*. Affected people say they feel strange in their own body or observe themselves from the outside. This is known as depersonalization. Derealization describes an event in which the environment is perceived as changed. Both phenomena often occur together with panic attacks. Both fall within the framework of dissociative phenomena.

But where is the connection between the flashbacks, *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),* and Brendan?

I once suggested in an answer to a review that Brendan of course doesn't just suffer from flashbacks. However, understandably, he has them, too. That is the crux of trauma and mental illness of all kinds. Science likes to sort them into individual states and phenomena in the classic way, but in reality, they often occur in combination and are sometimes difficult to distinguish from one another. For example, it sometimes takes years to discover a DID (dissociative identity disorder) behind schizophrenia. The hallucinations associated with some flashbacks often have led to

misdiagnoses in the past. Likewise, the splitting of the personality into different parts is still often regarded as schizophrenic—even if only by laymen.

Patients like Brendan, who don't have classic DID but still carry a split part, have a semi-awareness of that part. When that part acts, they often know—but not always!—what they did during that time or what happened. Nevertheless, they are usually unable to understand the feelings of this part in concrete terms.

For example, Brendan doesn't know what he's doing. A trigger causes him to experience a series of flashbacks and dissociative phenomena such as depersonalization and finally into an alternate state of consciousness in order to protect himself from his traumatic memories. He experiences the little boy's memories without emotion. What he does during this time remains hidden from him. He acts in a kind of psychotic trance, which can also be part of a dissociative disorder.

As the story progresses, he integrates his split part more and more, eventually merging symbolically with the little boy he used to be.

This is an important part of the healing process, but Brendan is far from well. By accepting his split part, he gets a different approach to the suffering he has experienced.

So what does the therapy look like for someone like Brendan? I deliberately did not explain it in more detail because I wanted to write a novel about an unusual love and not about therapy.

People like Brendan need to work through their painful memories and there are a variety of ways to do it. The therapy can consist of conversations and hypnosis. Flashbacks or PTSD is treated today e.g. with the *EMDR method* (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) which means "desensitization and processing through eye movement." Traumatic memories, using bilateral stimulation (controlled eye movement by the therapist's finger movement) are retrieved again and evaluated less negatively due to the stimulation and saved.

Body therapies such as breathing techniques and progressive muscle relaxation are also used.

In general, trauma therapy is about stabilization, distancing, and finally the integration of the traumatic experience. Because we are all individuals, we all respond differently to therapies, so the therapist must decide which therapy is best for which patient. Sometimes, patients find out for themselves what helps them. With Brendan, it's drawing. Generally, art therapy can also be included in the healing process as part of trauma therapy. If you are interested in trauma therapy, there is also relevant specialist literature.

In conclusion, one thing remains to be clarified. Brendan is by no means healed by the end of this story, although some readers felt that way in *Trapped—Until You Love Me*. He said he was in therapy, but therapy usually takes years. I deliberately left the ending open even if it has the appearance of a happy ending. At the time, I felt that the reader, but also Lou and Bren, deserved a happy ending, and I wanted one too.

Maybe Lou and Bren will find happiness in Faro—or in the wilderness. Perhaps he will successfully complete his therapy. The two of them may or may not make it. I do not know if there will be a sequel, but I am going to keep that option open at this point. If I decide against it, everyone can continue spinning their own ending. There's something I like about this idea much more than that of a sequel…

<u>A list of my information material</u> (in addition to my knowledge as an occupational therapist and personal experiences):

<u>Internet</u>:

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissoziation_(Psychologie) (Last accessed 11/14/16)
http://www.aufrecht.net/ (Last accessed 11/14/16)
http://www.trau-dich-bs.de/beratung/72-traumatherapie (Last accessed 11/14/16)
etc. on request

Literature:

In German:
Der Junge, der wie ein Hund gehalten wurde: Was traumatisierte Kinder uns über Leid, Liebe und Heilung lehren können—Aus der Praxis eines Kinderpsychiaters (Bruce D. Perry)
Flashback—Die Schleiferin: Eine verschlossene Tür in der Seele öffnet sich (Rita Arendt)
Reise Know-How Outdoor Praxis: Outdoor-Ratgeber—Ausrüstung, Verhalten, Gefahren, Survival (Sachbuch) (Rainer Höh)
Translated titles of the above literature:
The Boy Who Was Handled Like a Dog: What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Suffering, Love, and Healing—From the Practice of a Child Psychiatrist (Bruce D. Perry)
Flashback—The Grinder: A locked door in the soul opens (Rita Arendt)
Travel Know-How Outdoor Practice: Outdoor-Guide—Equipment, Behavior, Dangers, Survival (non-fiction) (Rainer Höh)

TRAPPED Collection: Under Northern Skies
Until You Love Me & Until The Darkest Of Night
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Mila Olsen
Uta Maier, Apfelstraße 7a, 69517 Gorxheimertal
Germany
www.milaolsenbooks.com